VALLEY OF A THOUSAND HILLS

by F. E. MILLS YOUNG

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

CHIP
SAM'S KID
ATONEMENT
GRIT LAWLESS
THE PURPLE MISTS
MYLES CALTHORPE, I.D.B.
A MISTAKEN MARRIAGE

VALLEY OF A THOUSAND HILLS

By F. E. MILLS YOUNG

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I

THE chief engineer looked darkly after the disappearing figure of the passenger, his look of annoyance deepening, as though the set of the man's shoulders, seeming to express their owner's disgust, as he made for the saloon opening and stepped out upon the iron deck, excited his rising ire. Then he turned his lowering countenance towards the captain, seated at the head of the table, and made his appeal to authority in a protest that was half a rebuke.

"I wonder you don't interfere," he said.

"What's the use? . . . The food's there,—it's take it, or leave it," the captain was beginning, when he broke off abruptly to swear at the steward for washing his thumbs in the gravy in the plate he was setting before him.

The chief engineer was not satisfied.

"It makes my gorge rise," he remarked, "to hear that chap always finding fault with his grub. . . . I'll say something to 'im one of these days."

The captain, who was a gentleman as well as the skipper of a "tramp," glanced at the speaker with a faintly amused smile. Neither the smile, nor the

carelessly uttered warning,—"Well, see that you don't annoy him," tended to pacify the irate engineer.

"I'll say something to 'im," he muttered darkly. "It puts me off my feed to 'ear 'im talk."

The passenger, meanwhile, having gained the deck, was leaning disconsolately over the side, unconscious of the discussion his distaste for the rough fare had raised, and feeling, as he watched the grey, white-crested waves running towards him and smacking against the vessel's side, so unutterably miserable, so disturbed internally, that the daintiest food if offered would have seemed an insult, so that, even had he overheard, it was possible the engineer's dark threat to "say something" would not have disconcerted him greatly. In all likelihood he would have told him off to those remote regions to which men in their anger are carelessly wont to consign the objects of their wrath. Yet he was not naturally ill-tempered or ill-natured; under existing conditions he was both.

Anthony Heckraft was thirty, and he had never known before what it was to rough it. Roughing it had appealed strongly to him in theory. There is an effeminacy in the idea of a man swathed from his birth in comfort, against which he instinctively rebelled; the time arrives for the putting off of swaddling clothes. But that time had only dawned for Heckraft when domestic troubles robbed him of a comfortable income; and he was discovering in this, his first experience, that, in practice, roughing it, though doubtless the splendid inheritance of every virile son of Adam, requires a certain amount of training before a man can thoroughly gauge his capacity for endurance. And yet, though utterly distasteful, he knew it was the discipline he stood in need of. When the body is habitually pampered the

mind is apt to suffer enervation, the entire forces, physical and mental, are in danger of debilitation. Heckraft was aware that his splendid strength, which he had never fully exerted, was a force wasted, a benefit he could not appreciate because it had never been thoroughly tried; he realised that his active brain was a still greater force representing a still greater waste; it had been allowed to lie fallow so long, had been so neglected and ill-nurtured that it had become more or less atrophied. It would take time and strong endeavour and discipline to bring these wasted forces into condition. And at the very outset he was rebelling against the discipline. He would not have turned back, had that been possible. He had made up his mind to face life; the smooth path was his no longer; he had to hew out a road for himself, as others had been forced to do. Thanks to his splendid physique, he was better qualified for the task than many who undertook it.

But though his determination was great, he took no pleasure in the prospect before him, nothing but the grim knowledge that he had to make his own way in life, and a very clear conception of the waste he had made of it hitherto, added to a reluctance—greater, because more worthy, than the reluctance to relinquish his ease—a shamed reluctance to continue this prodigal squandering of his powers, held him to his purpose. He had to go forth and conquer life—or go under. To a man of Anthony Heckraft's temperament the alternative was not worthy of consideration. There could be no such thing as failure.

While he stood there, staring moodily down into the grey broken waters in which the heavily laden but ill-ballasted cargo boat was tumbling wantonly, his bodily discomfort conflicting with and aggravating his mental distress, Walford, the first officer,

strolled up and joined him. He was a big, fair man, with a choleric blue eye, and a temper that excited itself unexpectedly without any apparent cause, for which reason he was more disliked than respected by the crew, and his brother officers, who exerted their diplomacy in dealing with him solely in recognition of his rank. This man, who was about the passenger's own age, showed a predilection for Heckraft's society, which, possibly, was less the outcome of affinity than of a certain consciousness that here too was a man against whom life held a grudge, a man who was up against the world and inclined to quarrel with it. Heckraft had not confided in him; he was not one to discuss his private affairs with any chance acquaintance; but the sailor was a judge of character, and he had summed his man up unerringly,—save that he inclined to exaggerate matters; being of a pessimistic bent, he painted his canvases in the darkest hues.

"Bit off colour?" he inquired, slouching up, and leaning beside the other with his arms on the sticky rail.

Heckraft raised his eyes from the heaving waters and looked at the speaker gloomily.

"I feel beastly rotten," he said.

The officer nodded sympathetically. In his opinion the man looked exactly what he had described himself as feeling. He was green about the gills. The strong, pleasant, but at no time handsome, face was drawn and grey, and there was a two days' growth of hair which did not add to its attractiveness. As Heckraft reflected, feeling the stubble on his chin, no man, unless he contemplated suicide, would dream of shaving; and he was not feeling sufficiently comfortable to trouble about such things, otherwise he was aware that one of the seamen, who barbered indiscrim-

inately, would have removed the growth for a consideration.

"We'll be out of the Bay this afternoon," the sailor observed by way of consolation.

"But a man ought not to feel seasick with that amount of sea," Heckraft complained. . . . "Shows a want of balance."

The officer smiled grimly.

"They've loaded her like a lot of counter-jumpers," he explained. "But then we don't reckon on passengers. There's no accommodation."

Heckraft, whose complaint had been in reference to his personal deficit and no reflection on the vessel's ballasting, merely nodded. He was travelling by the *Ariadne* from motives of economy, and, since she was not a passenger boat, was entered in the ship's book as purser. The arrangement had been brought about through a friend of his who happened to be connected with one of the owners. Through another friend he had obtained the position he was going out to South Africa to fill; so that, as he recognised, his first steps upon the road of independence had been hewn for him by others.

"I've been afloat since I was a boy," Walford said musingly, "and I still feel squeamish whenever there's a bit of a sea on. . . . That's in steam; aboard a windjammer I'm as happy as I should be ashore. It's all steam now," he added disparagingly. "I don't suppose there's anyone aboard this boat, with the exception of myself—and possibly the old man—who would know how to sail a ship if the engines broke down,—that's why the engineers put on such an amount of swank. Theoretical training isn't worth much when put to the test."

As though to justify his repudiation of the superiority of steam over canvas, something did go wrong

in the engine-room, and the *Ariadne* lay helpless, bobbing about in the trough of the waves, while the engineers worked hard for six hours putting matters right. At the end of the six hours she was got under way again, and everyone, with the exception of the first officer, was out of humour,—the captain on account of the delay, and the engineers because of the extra work and the knowledge that it would be necessary to nurse the engines during the rest of the voyage. But Walford went about with a bland smile as a man who, his opinion being backed by results, feels his case proved.

"I hope you aren't due to arrive in Durban by any particular date?" he remarked pleasantly to Heckraft, who lay supine on one of the hatches, wrapped in his travelling rug, cursing everything with the unreasoning irritability of seasickness.

"Why? Does this delay mean much?" he asked.

"A matter of half a day. If nothing further happens we shall get into Las Palmas six hours late, that's all. We coal there, and they have a funny little habit of keeping tramps waiting. . . . You are going out to a job, aren't you?"

Heckraft, as he met the inquisitive blue eye realised that these disturbing confidences were merely the means by which the speaker sought to disguise a desire to gain information concerning him. He rolled over and half sat up.

"Yes; I'm going out to a job," he said. "But a day or two won't make any difference to me."

"I see. What part of Natal are you bound for? Going to stop in Durban?"

"No. I'm going a few miles out,—about a couple of hours' journey by train. Drummond is the name of the place."

"Never heard of it," the other answered, which

was not surprising; his South African geography being limited to a knowledge of the ports of call, and Drummond, though on the main line, being sufficiently unimportant to remain obscure and little known even to Natalians, despite the wonder of its scenery, its high altitude, and the health-giving qualities of its soft mist-laden air.

"That's likely enough," Heckraft responded. "There's nothing but wattle plantations there—and blacks, I believe."

"What on earth takes you to a place like that?" his companion demanded. "Africa's big enough. . . . Why don't you make for the mines?"

"I'm going on to a plantation—as manager," Heckraft explained.

The choleric blue eyes opened wider.

"Lord! You won't make a fortune in wattles," their owner announced with gloomy conviction. "And you can't make companions of niggers. . . . You'll take to drink." The speaker looked down suddenly at the big, reclining figure resting on its elbow, and partially covered by the rug, and asked abruptly,—"Married?"

"No." Heckraft threw off the rug and came to a sitting posture. "I should rather fancy you knew all about me," he said.

The officer smiled queerly.

"I'm damned if I'll take any further interest in you," he remarked amiably, and walked away forthwith; and Heckraft sat on the hatch, nursing his knee, and looking after him as he strode along the deck, his peaked cap pulled forward over his eyes, his coat-collar turned up, meeting the stiff breeze which was blowing fresh from the south-east and driving before it a grey, salt-laden haze.

It was cold on deck, and cheerless. The gleam of wet rusty iron caught the eye, of wet masts against a darkening grey sky which, with the constantly shifting line of the horizon, appeared to be making rapid semi-revolutions, as though nature were bent on demonstrating to the naked eye how the world revolves on its axis, and, thinking better of it, swinging abruptly back again to its centre.

Heckraft stood up, and throwing the rug over his arm, made his uncertain way towards the entry. It was stuffy in the cabin, stuffier still in his berth, but the dampness and the cold wind drove him to seek shelter.

The steward was laying the table for the evening meal, which on board the *Ariadne* was a compromise between tea and supper, making up in substantiality what it lacked in daintiness. By no stretch of the imagination could it have been dignified by the term dinner. Heckraft experienced a nauseating reluctance to participate in the meal, but he had been so unmercifully chaffed on the one occasion that he had absented himself from the table that he had since forced himself to make the effort to sit down with the rest, though the idea of food revolted him, and the smell of it made him sick.

When he took his seat as usual that evening opposite the chief engineer, the latter, having been twice ruffled that day, and being in no mood to silently endure the fastidious passenger's criticism of food that was good enough for himself, glanced across at him sharply, the keen eyes under their bushy brows conveying mutely that their owner intended "saying something" if the passenger annoyed him. Heckraft, quite unconscious that he was giving offence, impatiently waved aside the plate of Irish stew which the steward tentatively proffered, and despatched that

bewildered person in search of a ship's biscuit and a cup of coffee,—anything fit to eat.

"You don't seem to like your food," the engineer remarked, leaning half way across the table, and speaking with a suavity that would have prepared anyone familiar with him for something particularly scathing to follow.

Realising that the speech was intended for him, Heckraft looked up from his plate to stare.

"Eh?" he said.

The engineer glanced eloquently at the captain before returning to the attack.

"I say, you don't seem to like your food," he repeated with less suavity and an increase of sarcasm in his tones, and added crushingly: "Fancies yourself a bit of an epigram, don't you?"

"I shut 'im up, sir," he boasted to the captain later. "'E 'adn't a word to say for 'imself."

Which was literally true. To such a charge Heckraft had felt there was no possible answer.

The captain merely smiled as he walked away. But from that time onward he evinced an interest in his discontented passenger which he had not shown before, an interest that went so far as the placing of his state-room at the latter's disposal during the day, and such simple additions to comfort which experience had taught him to be of importance on the high seas. Thus unintentionally the chief engineer benefited the man he despised, the man who was hewing out a road for his feet to travel, and had unconsciously turned the first spadeful that evening at table. It is so easy to be superior at the expense of ignorance, that the human being proves his right to respect whose consideration places him above such paltry triumphs.

II

THE *Ariadne,* as Walford had so pessimistically foretold, was kept waiting at Las Palmas while the more important liners were supplied with fuel. While she lay at anchor, waiting to be coaled, Heckraft went ashore, as did the captain, and lesser members of the crew, to whom the compulsory idleness was a blessing in disguise, and therefore a benefit that might be enjoyed grudgingly and be made a subject for grumbling, which seems to add to the value of human gratification.

Heckraft spent the greater part of the day in the wildly beautiful grounds of the Santa Catalina, that lay sandwiched between the blue of the sea and the yellow line of the sandhills behind it. The squalid town and gaudy bazaars held little attraction for him. But it was good to feel the solid ground beneath his feet once more, and to realise that from henceforth he would be in summer seas and no longer tormented with the internal disturbances which had made the first part of the voyage such a ghastly nightmare.

Towards sunset, pleasantly tired with the heat and the glare of the island, he returned to the ship, to find her decks practically deserted, and only the third officer, who was commonly known as Johnny, leaning upon the rail, smoking the inevitable briar. Heckraft joined him and fell into desultory talk.

"I suppose it doesn't interest you to go ashore?" he remarked, not particularly concerned as to the young man's tastes but wishful to be conversational.

Johnny removed the briar from his mouth and spat into the sea.

"I'd go fast enough if there was anything to go for," he confided. "But it only means getting rid of money there is plenty of use for, and not sufficient satisfaction for the outlay. The second's gone. . . . He's got a girl on shore. She's teaching some Spanish kids. He doesn't seem to get much fun out of it. . . . If he does, he hides it fairly successfully,—always comes aboard nervy, if you know what I mean."

Heckraft, who had not yet heard this euphonism for ill-temper, a misapplication for which the chief officer was indirectly responsible, took the term literally, and nodded vaguely.

"Can't say I was ever troubled with nerves myself," he answered. . . . "Don't know what they are."

"Ask the chief," said Johnny with a grin.

The chief was at that moment coming along the deck. He paused beside the passenger, and while they looked out together upon the long broken coastline, upon the arid hills, and straggling town dominated by the black towers of the cathedral, he sought for enlightenment on the subject of neurosis, less again from curiosity than from the lazy desire to converse on the first topic that offered.

"Nerves!" said the chief officer expressively. "Great Scott! I should think I do know what nerves are. I lost my girl through my confounded nerves, and though I've travelled the world over, I never met her equal; and that's why I'm still a bachelor,—and likely to remain one."

He filled his pipe slowly, and lighted it with a deliberation that betokened preoccupation, and then thrust the stem almost savagely between his teeth, his blue eyes shining with latent fire suggestive of a passion-

ate disposition, which the owner thereof had so frequently described as neurotic that the misnomer had become an accepted term for any violence of temper among those who suffered through the frequent neurotic outbursts.

"It was before I got into steam," he added reminiscently. "I was mate of a smart little brig then, and the skipper was part owner. . . . Gad! I should have dropped into a neat thing if that girl hadn't chucked me. She was his daughter."

"Whose daughter?" inquired the third, who was losing the thread of the story.

"The brig's, of course," retorted his superior contemptuously. "You've got so many ideas, Johnny, that they're apt to stray. But it don't matter; you needn't listen."

"I'm listening all right," rejoined Johnny quickly, anxious to prevent a nervous attack, which, had their relative positions been reversed, he would not have troubled to do. "Only I didn't want to mix things. Fire ahead."

"She went the voyage with us," resumed the other slowly between the puffs of smoke. "I shall never forget my first sight of her. I was busy getting ready for sailing. . . . A mate's got to put his hands to the ropes aboard a sailing vessel, and not shout his orders to other people ——"

"I know," put in Johnny testily.

"No doubt you do," returned the other sarcastically. "But you have never been a voyage in a sailer for all that. I've spent most of my time in them, and I prefer them infinitely to steam. Anyway, I was pretty busy, and pretty black when I first caught sight of Mollie, and she looked me over as she might have done a cabin boy, and walked aft like any princess. She was a clinker, and no mistake,—good figure,

good points, and a mischievous, taking way that made a fellow want to do great things to show her what a fine chap he was."

He broke off, and, sighing deeply, puffed at his pipe for a few seconds in a silence which neither of his listeners broke. They too smoked, and gazed absently out across the water.

"Extra navigating officer, her father called her," the chief proceeded after the pause. "It made me smile, for I had a notion of the kind of navigating it was likely to be. But I was mistaken. That girl could handle a ship—I was going to say, better than I could,—anyway, long chalks better than you could, Johnny, and better than her father too. I was fairly surprised to see her do a whole watch without so much as thinking of being relieved, but to see her take watch in dirty weather used to make my ——"

"Nerves bad," suggested the third.

"She'd go on duty in the old man's oil-skins as gay as a bird," resumed the narrator, without heeding the interruption. "She took her job seriously,—a bit too seriously for me; there was too much of the first mate about her. She was rather fond of interfering with my work, thought she could teach me things that I thought she couldn't; and we used to get nasty over it at times,—though I was sorry enough afterwards, and ready to allow I was wrong. I was only twenty-two at that time, and inclined to be touchy about my dignity. That's all been knocked out of me since, but it's taken eight years to accomplish. She had a habit of laughing at me which used to get my back up, and I fancy she looked down on me too a little; but it was a nine months' voyage, and that doesn't necessitate any violent hurry, like in these steam packets, which hardly give a fellow time to make up his mind.

"We were somewhere about Sierra Leone when I began to make some headway with her; and one evening during a thunder storm when the lightning played round the decks like hell fire, and she was scared out of her wits—as I was myself, though I didn't let her guess it—we came to a proper understanding."

He paused for a moment, and his sombre eyes brightened while his thoughts turned back and wandered in pleasant by-ways of the past. When he spoke again his voice was tenderly reminiscent.

"After that, the days passed like—like— Have you ever been in love, Johnny?"

"Of course I have," answered the third in the tone of a man who feels himself insulted by the question.

"Then you know what they passed like. . . . I look back on that time now and wish that the infernal water-spout had burst over the ship."

"What water-spout?" inquired Heckraft, naturally enough.

"I'm coming to that presently," the other rejoined with undisguised impatience. "It was the water-spout that did the mischief."

"They often do," interposed Johnny with quickening interest. "I remember ——"

"Quit that," said Walford. "I'm doing the remembering just now."

The third relapsed into sulky silence, and smoked his pipe with a moody eye on the land, which was no further off than his attention, the latter being far from enchained by his senior's reminiscences.

"Well, as I was saying, those days were like heaven. The old man had given his consent, though he wasn't keen on the match. He was a warm man and his daughter might have done better."

The third acquiesced with a nod, and the speaker

broke off suddenly to glare at him; but, as the other was still staring stolidly at the coast-line, he realised the uselessness of trying to annihilate him with a look, and so resumed the thread of his yarn.

"I daresay he wouldn't have been so decent about it, but he knew that if I chose I could talk when I got ashore, and make things unpleasant for him in the shipping world; so he swallowed his feelings and made the best of the matter; and Mollie and I spooned openly, and enjoyed ourselves no end. It was too great to last, I suppose, so Providence intervened,—which is where the water-spout comes in that you were so anxious to hear about."

Johnny grunted. The grunt was as expressive as any verbal denial; but Walford seemed scarcely to notice it, and continued as though the grunt had been one of assent.

"The rum part is, that though that water-spout was to influence the rest of my life, I don't remember now where we were when we sighted it, though I noted it in the log-book myself. I've seen several in my time, but I was never so near to one before, and, Gad! I hope I shan't be again. It was right over the ship. All hands were busy at the sails, myself included, and the old man was giving his orders with a face on him I shall never forget. He was in a mortal funk. I never remember anyone look less anxious to quit this vale of tears. He was naturally a lazy man, but he worked like a blessed trinity that day. Mollie was down below, and didn't know anything about it. There was a good deal of scuffling and noise going on, but in a sailing vessel one gets used to that; and presently she came up on deck smiling gaily, as though we weren't all looking death in the face and trying to tack out of its road. She came over to me, nearly tripping over the ropes lying

about. I was hauling away for dear life, with one eye on the water-spout, and the other cocked aloft, and I didn't see her till I bumped right against her. I nearly knocked her over; but she was a good-tempered girl, and I heard her laugh lightly as she righted herself.

"'I wish you'd look where you're going,' she said.

"I glanced round sharply. She was laughing right in my face. Glory! it gave me a queer feeling with that horror over our heads. There wasn't time for me to more than glance at her, but my nerves were pretty bad, as anyone's would have been in the circumstances, and I just shouted, as I swung round with the rope ready for tacking:

"'Get out of my way, silly. You'll be grinning in your grave in a minute.'

"She didn't answer anything, but I know she looked up and caught sight of a water-spout. I reckon it was the first she'd seen, but it didn't require much knowledge of their ways to recognise the danger. I hadn't time then to notice whether she went below or stayed where she was. I was so blankety sure we were going to be swamped that I could think of nothing else. And we weren't, after all. We got clear by a miracle. The thing burst to starboard clear of the ship. But it was the nearest shave I've ever seen, and it left us all pretty limp.

"I was on deck helping to shorten sail when the old man came running up in such a hurry that I feared we had sprung a leak or something, and my nerves began to jump again.

"'George,' he shouted, 'what did you say to frighten my girl? She's on the cabin floor in a dead faint.'

"It seemed he'd been down for a nip, which was his way of returning thanks to Providence for mercies shown, and he'd found Mollie in a heap on the

cabin floor almost at the foot of the companion. My heart thumped. I left the others to look after the ship, and I bolted below like a shot from a gun. She was on the floor in a faint right enough; but she was beginning to come round when I reached her side; and we gave her some rum, and rubbed her hands, and poured water over her face.

"'You ought to loosen her clothes,' I said to the old man.

"'I don't know how to,' he answered. But he took off her boots, which was something he did understand, and it seemed to have the desired effect, for she let out with one foot and kicked him in the mouth, and, to the best of my recollection, he swore.

"She came round precious slowly, starting from the feet, as it were. First she'd twitch in one limb, and then she'd twitch in the other. Her father was carrying on like an idiot, crying and swearing at intervals, and calling me all the names he could lay his tongue to; for I had told him what I had said to Mollie, and it had made him pretty mad. What with the fright, and pouring out rum for Mollie, and drinking it by mistake himself, and absently repeating the performance, he was getting excited. But I was too upset myself to take much notice of him, and I let him rave on, while I patted my girl's hands, and loosened her collar, and begged her to forgive me for a clumsy brute—which was ridiculous, because she couldn't hear me. And when she did open her eyes she looked about her in a bewildered way as though she didn't quite know where she was. Then her gaze met mine fully. I saw a flash of recollection come into her eyes, they grew wide with terror in an instant, and, as I'm a sinful man, I'm blest if she didn't go clean off again."

"And no wonder," commented Johnny.

"What do you mean by that?" the other demanded fiercely.

"Well, after a fright like that, I'm not surprised that she should," returned Johnny innocently.

The chief eyed him suspiciously for a moment, and then went on with his tale.

"The old man began to rave when he saw her go off the second time.

" 'She's dying,' he yelled. 'And it's your fault, you devil!'

"I got up and put the rum bottle out of his reach. Discipline is discipline, but there comes a time when you've got to make quite certain what discipline means. As I understood the term then, it included looking after the skipper's interest, as well as other things. But he didn't like it, and, as I found to my cost afterwards, he didn't forgive it either.

" 'She isn't dying,' I said, a trifle bitterly, for her going off like that at sight of me had made me a bit sore. 'She's only jolly well scared, and when she comes round again you've got to attend to her, for I'm going to clear.'

"And I did too. As soon as I saw a flutter of her eyelid I was up that companion as though seven devils were behind me, and I took jolly good care to keep out of her sight all day. The next morning she stayed in her bunk, so I hadn't a chance of asking her forgiveness for frightening her as I had done; and the old man was as surly as a bear with a sore head. He had a sore head literally, I believe, which accounted, of course, for his temper; and he was a bit worried about Mollie as well. She didn't show up until the following day, and then she came into the cabin where I was, looking very white ——"

"What was the matter with you?" inquired Johnny sympathetically.

"Don't be a bally idiot. It was the girl who was looking white."

"Oh!" said the third.

"'Mollie!' I said, going up to her. And it was lucky I reached her when I did, for I'm bothered if she didn't tumble right into my arms."

"Must have been fond of you," commented the third.

Walford shook his head gloomily.

"It wasn't affection," he said. "She had fainted dead away again."

"I think you were well out of it," remarked Johnny consolingly. "That girl couldn't have been healthy."

"She was as healthy as you," the other retorted. "She was laughing and talking with her father ten minutes afterwards, and she ate as hearty a breakfast as any girl should; for I saw her through the skylight, though I didn't go down again."

"I should think not," put in Heckraft, with the glimmer of a smile in his eyes. There was no answering smile in Walford's; he looked preternaturally grave.

"She came on deck later," he resumed, "and I could see she was purposely keeping out of my way, so I didn't go near her either. But that night I wrote her a little note, explaining how sorry I was, and begging for forgiveness. I gave the note to her father next morning and asked him to let her have it when she came in for breakfast. Then I went up on deck, hoping that by and bye she would come up and speak to me. But nothing of the kind. She took no more notice of that letter than if it had never been written."

"Are you quite sure she got it?" asked the third,

who was beginning to get interested in spite of himself.

Walford took his pipe from his mouth and regarded the speaker in wondering silence for fully half a minute. Then he spoke.

"My God! Johnny, you've got a head," he said. "I never thought of that."

"Seeing the old man didn't care particularly for the match," pursued the man of marked intelligence, "I don't think you displayed great foresight in making a pillar-box of him. You'd better have trusted one of the men."

"You're right," said the chief with conviction, and added gloomily,—"But it's too late to regret a thing that took place eight years ago. He's dead now, her father; and I don't know where she is either—married, I expect, long ago. . . .

"Well, all that day she kept out of my way, and the next. If I was in the cabin at meal times, she went out as soon as she caught sight of me there; so of course I kept away so as not to annoy her at all. But one day, when the voyage was getting towards the finish, and I was feeling pretty low, and well-nigh desperate, I walked boldly up to her on deck, determined to have it out; but, as I'm a sinful man, if that girl didn't turn pale at sight of me and fall flat on the deck in a dead faint."

"Pshaw!" ejaculated the third scornfully. "She was shamming."

Walford paused and looked at him in meditative silence.

"I don't know," he answered at length very slowly. . . . "I only wish I did."

"Seems to me," said the third, "she was a spiteful little minx, and wanted to pay you out."

"If you call her names, Johnny," replied the chief

very quietly, "I'll hit you. And I should be sorry to be obliged to do that."

"When she went off like that I gave it up, though I had a long talk about it with her father first. It was shock, he explained. I had frightened her so badly that when she caught sight of me it acted on her nerves. She was bright and well enough otherwise. Well, of course, I assured him that I wouldn't subject her to any fresh shocks; and I went for'ard for the rest of the time and messed with the men. And, if you'll believe it, when we got ashore the old man paid me off and sacked me, and I've never set eyes on Mollie since. That's what nerves did for me. . . .

"I wasn't long in getting a fresh appointment. I fancy the old man recommended me. But I was pretty sick over the business. And, somehow, whenever I've seen a nice girl since I've always had Mollie Heathcote's face in front of hers, blotting the other out."

He straightened himself abruptly as he finished speaking, thrust the pipe, which had gone out, into his pocket, and without another word turned suddenly away. Johnny looked after him as he walked along the deck, and his eyes were speculative when he turned them upon the passenger.

"I reckon that girl had the let off of her life," was his only comment.

Heckraft, remembering the look on the face of the man as he spun his story, the man whom, despite his queer moods, he instinctively liked, made no response. He was not so sure that the girl had not missed her happiness in coquetting with life.

III

A SHIP during the process of coaling being about the most uncomfortable place possible, Heckraft went ashore as soon as work was started, and mooned away the sunny hours as on the previous day under the trees in the garden of the Santa Catalina. A pretty little English girl staying at the hotel, with a pink and white complexion, and a seductive mouth, swung in a hammock a few yards distant and flirted with him with her eyes. He amused himself in like manner for a while, and was seriously contemplating decreasing the distance between them, when an elderly woman appeared in the pathway, and, to their mutual dissatisfaction, joined the girl of the hammock. The girl's mutinous face expressed her vexation; the man, feeling bored, rose and sauntered away; and the old lady, who was shortsighted, and whose unimaginative mind would never have conceived it possible that she could intrude on a *têtê-á-tête* without words between complete strangers, sat down on the seat Heckraft had contemplated occupying beneath the shade of the tree round which the head-rope which suspended the hammock was wound, and took out her knitting.

"It is very pleasant here in the cool," she said complacently.

But the girl merely yawned and made no response. She had thought it pleasant herself until the old lady came in sight. It is extraordinary the subtle shades

of difference that may be introduced by an exchange of companionship.

Heckraft, who had been warned as to the hour of the *Ariadne's* sailing, returned on board as the last lighter was discharging her few remaining bags of coal, and the sailors were getting the hose out preparatory to washing down decks. Coal dust lay thick on everything. The shoulders of the natives, stripped to the waist, were coated with it as with a garment; even the cabin, despite jealously closed ports, was gritty and uncomfortable, and the leather of the settees yielded a sticky black dust wherever one rested a hand. The steward was going about with a grimy, ineffectual duster, trying to remove the dirt; and Heckraft, reasoning that, since it was impossible to dodge the coal dust, it was preferable to get dirty in the open air than to remain in a closed and stuffy cabin, returned to the deck, and watched operations with the detached interest of an outsider.

The chief officer, who was suffering from an attack of nerves, was swearing at the men. Heckraft saw him savagely kick a native, and rather expected a row; but the bronze giant, who had been carrying hundredweights of coal as easily as a white man would have shouldered a knapsack, only limped away, muttering, and scowled at his aggressor from a safe distance. Heckraft felt no sympathy for him. There was as little dignity in the dark man's servile manner of suffering the assault as there was in the vicious attack of the white man, knowing he had no retaliation to fear. It was a mean exhibition of cowardice on both sides. Heckraft was going out to work among coloured men. He wondered whether he would ever sink to the level of kicking his coolies. The mind of the dark races was as yet a closed book to him, but he had few illusions concerning it; and

the scene he had just witnessed did not tend to increase his respect. It had not needed that, any more than Walford's assertion that it was impossible to make companions of niggers, to enforce his recognition of the gulf between white and black. Colour prejudice was no less strong in him than in most Europeans; but a sense of fairness adjusted the scale of his judgment, and inclined him to be tolerant of what he failed to understand.

He watched the natives go over the side, and tumble into the lighter among the empty coal-bags; and then followed such a scouring of decks that he was forced to retreat to the cabin again; and when next he emerged everything was clean and orderly once more, and all wet and shiny as though there had been a heavy fall of rain.

The rest of the voyage was pure enjoyment for Heckraft, a succession of warm summer days, and starlit summer nights; lazy days with nothing to do but watch the play of sunlight on blue water; and nights that were filled with magic, with the gentle music of the waves lapping against the vessel's side, the soft stir of the breeze under the awning that was spread to keep the sun off the deck during the daytime, and the passionate strains of a violin, which Heckraft brought out of its case one evening and surprised and delighted an unlearned, but none the less critical, audience by playing with a master's hand. Through his violin he overcame the chief engineer's early prejudice against him, and by its means also successfully soothed Walford's easily upset nerves.

"He's a fine fiddler," the latter remarked on one occasion to the engineer, when Heckraft had retired to the cabin with his instrument under his arm.

The chief engineer grunted.

"I don't know whether he's much of a fiddler," he

responded; and added with conviction: "But he's a damned good scrape with the gut."

He rose and walked heavily down the deck, meeting the passenger as the latter emerged from the cabin, having shut his instrument away from the air. The encounter appeared accidental, which it was not, and Heckraft would have passed on, but the engineer stood in his path.

"Funny that a bit of music should make a man think," he said vaguely,—"think of things he wasn't thinking of before."

Heckraft nodded sympathetically. There was nothing odd in the idea to him because he knew that music speaks to the soul.

"It stirs a man," the engineer proceeded awkwardly, in the jerky manner of one who is feeling about after expression, "I'm married. I've got a little kid at 'ome,—a cripple. . . . A crumpled rose-leaf, that's what she is. . . . Your scraping put that idea into my head."

"It's a pretty idea," Heckraft said, "for the child to grow up with."

The engineer turned and walked beside him the length of the ill-lighted deck.

"You don't read poetry, I suppose?" he said.

Heckraft admitted that he did.

"There's a poem that says something about music laying lightly on the soul. . . . Well, it's a lie. Music lays heavy. It makes a man miserable. . . And the funny part is, it makes 'im glad to be miserable. I can't understand it, but that's 'ow it is."

"The emotions are as the strings of a violin," Heckraft returned; "when touched they vibrate."

"Yes; but there's different ways of touching them," the engineer insisted.

"True! A sympathetic touch produces harmony;

touch them roughly and you make discord. . . . And there's more discord than harmony in life."

"I don't know so much about that," the other, who was inclined to be argumentative, contended. "If life was such a rotten show as many people try to make out, we shouldn't be so loath to quit. We find fault with being 'ere, but we mostly want to stay."

Heckraft smiled at the optimist's bald manner of uttering profound truths. He had, his gloomy philosophy notwithstanding, no particular desire to quit himself. And he was ready to admit that satisfaction may be derived from degrees of happiness. Life, if one continuous harmony, would lose its intensity of sweetness through want of contrast.

"I've no quarrel with life," he said.

"Then don't you go about making fool remarks," the engineer admonished him; "there's too much of that kind of thing in the world, as it is. . . . I'll give you a bit of advice," he added, after a moment's reflection. "A man gave it to me once, and I acted on it, and never 'ad cause to regret it either—Marry."

"Marry!" Heckraft repeated ironically,—"On a salary and no prospects?"

"Why not? . . . A safer plan than marrying on prospects and no salary, like some do."

"I daresay. But ——"

"You're going to tell me, I suppose, that you've been disappointed in love?" the engineer threw in jeeringly.

Heckraft suddenly laughed.

"I've never been in love in my life," he asserted.

His listener surveyed him doubtfully for a full minute in silence.

"If that isn't a lie," he observed at length, with the incredulity of a man who has paid due homage

to the sex, "there's something wrong in your composition, my son. . . ."

The *Ariadne* steamed into Table Bay at midnight, and dropped anchor opposite the great rock which is the closed gate of Africa. Heckraft had waited up to have a look at the land that has been the Mecca of many a man's ambition, and the despair of many others. It held out no alluring prospect for him; it offered simply a wider field for the worker than most places, and facilities for the non-professional which are not obtainable elsewhere. It is, as a matter of fact, essentially a land for labour; for the professional man as yet Africa provides small scope; it is the older civilisations that have need of the latter. The need in the Colony can only be created when the labour market is sufficiently stocked; when the vast tracts of waste land are put under cultivation, and existing industries further developed; when the plentiful and much needed water, which flows beneath the sterile bosom of the great Karroo, is brought to the surface and used to irrigate the land which would yield a marvellous return were it not for the continuous struggle against protracted drought.

The solution of many of the difficult problems of the South Africa of to-day would be found in the encouragement of emigration. The Union does not encourage emigration. Emigration would strengthen British influence in the Colony, for which reason alone it is highly desirable in a British Colony where British influence is noticeably weak. South Africa's need of emigration is more immediately urgent than Canada's, though possibly less apparent to the undiscerning eye. The old country could spare some of her sons; there is plenty of room in the new country for men who are not afraid of work, who have the steady courage to conscientiously make their way, and

sufficient self-reliance to depend on their own energy and push to succeed. The old days of rapid fortune-making are numbered among the limbo of almost forgotten things.

It was a misty night on which the *Ariadne* dropped anchor in Table Bay in a convenient berth for docking at daylight. The moon, not yet at its full, struggled bravely through the thin haze which partially obscured it, and threw over the calm surface of the sea a sheen of silvery light. Against the pale background of the sky, in which the stars were veiled, the mountain stood out darkly in bold relief, impressive in its sombre grandeur, the long black line of its square summit ruled sharply against the purple bosom of the heavens that leaned towards it, while it held itself frowningly aloof, as it held itself aloof from, while seeming to guard, the city that nestled at its base. And below the mountain, like footlights in their brilliant regularity, stretched the lights of the harbour, lights which flung a pale reflection on the water beneath.

Heckraft leaned upon the rail and looked at the wonderful approach to this land whose shores he had drifted towards on a wave of coincident adversity, an approach which is, perhaps, the most magnificently wonderful in the world; and the grandeur of it moved him inexpressibly. He had journeyed to this land reluctantly, with scant feeling of gratitude for the opportunity it offered, with a mind warped with bitterness and discontent; and Africa, dark, silent, repressive, sent forth her welcome to him across the peaceful moonlit waters of the bay, a welcome that breathed courage, and serene hope, and high endeavour, as she stretched forth dark alluring arms and gathered this, her latest son, into the witching, languorous mystery of her embrace.

IV

AS he journeyed round the coast to the port of his destination, Heckraft experienced no longer the alien sensation of the stranger in an unknown land. This land which he meant to make his home was a part of the Empire, one of the fairest of her dominions. A man does not necessarily feel an exile because six thousand miles and more lie between him and the place of his birth; and since his eyes had beheld Africa, and his senses felt the magic of her silent welcome, the overmastering resentment which had filled him since the tide of misfortune had so unexpectedly overwhelmed him lost the keenness of its edge. After all, given health and strength and youth, the best part of his inheritance was his still.

At Durban he was met by Johnson, the man whose estate in Drummond he was going to manage. Johnson lived in Durban. He possessed timber works and other interests there, and was, Heckraft understood, immensely wealthy. His son was at the moment in Drummond, filling the temporary gap between the departure of the late manager and the arrival of his successor; and, as the older man was eager, for reasons which he did not go into, to get him home, he speeded the new manager's departure for the scene of his future labour with what Heckraft deemed inconsiderate haste.

"I'd ask you out to my place to lunch," he said, "only you'll be up there in ample time; and I wired

Harold this morning to expect you by this train. It is rather important that he should get back to town. I can ill spare him just now; his being away is a tremendous tax on me."

The supposition that Harold Johnson assisted his father generally in his many interests, was a proof of his genius in appearing to put in his time profitably, while filling it to his own satisfaction, after the manner of a young man who draws a handsome allowance and possesses an unbounded capacity for enjoyment. He was at the present time enjoying himself in Drummond. It suited him to be there; otherwise the vacancy would have been filled by someone else, as would unquestionably have been the case had Johnson, senior, been sooner in possession of the information that had come to him indirectly within the last few days, information which, being an ambitious man socially, and having ideas for the future of his only son, had considerably annoyed him. He was sufficiently shrewd to be aware that an attempt to frustrate youthful indiscretion not infrequently precipitates what one would avert; he therefore decided to ignore what he had heard, and to keep his son, as far as it was possible, from visiting Drummond in future. But Drummond was only a distance of thirty odd miles, and young Johnson drove his own motor, two facts which Johnson, senior, had omitted in his calculations. In any case, he could not have insisted on his son putting down his car.

The train in which Heckraft made the tedious journey to Drummond passed through some of the fairest scenery he had ever beheld, as it laboured up the steep inclines, and rounded the sharp and surprisingly numerous curves of about the most uncomfortable and difficult line in the country. The steep gradients and the sharpness of the curves astonished

him; but as the train toiled laboriously upward, the feel of the air changed perceptibly; a soft light dryness was wafted in through the carriage windows, hot air, languid with the heat of the African summer, but altogether different in quality from the clammy, steamy heat of Durban.

Heckraft leaned far out of the swaying carriage and watched the country as it swept by, green with its splendid tropical vegetation, and glowing with the gorgeous colouring of its flowers; his eye noted with appreciation the wonder of the atmosphere, the lights and shades, the hard brilliance of the sunshine, and the shadows that lay dense among the tangled undergrowth that defied the fierce light of a golden sun shining in barbaric splendour in a sky of the deepest blue. And then, as the train passed Botha's Hill and ran on towards Drummond, the hills broke upon his vision, countless hills rising and falling in vast undulations like giant waves struck into sudden immovability, hills that were softly green in the golden light, rolling on endlessly, though without monotony, away into illimitable distance. Some of the hills were covered with wattles. There were wattle plantations on all sides. It occurred to Heckraft as he looked that he was something of an impostor. He was going to manage one of these plantations, and though he had made it his business to learn all he could about the industry, and had gone scientifically into the study of bark, he had very little practical experience. The extent of his ignorance, and his overwhelming impudence, struck him unpleasantly as the wattle plantations burst upon his vision with the wonder of the hills.

The train ran into the little station. Heckraft was the only passenger to alight. There was no one on the platform to meet him, no one to take charge of

his baggage, and no conveyance of any sort to be had. The station master, who was also signalman and local postmaster, suggested that he should leave his baggage and walk up the hill to the hotel. Since the walk was a matter of about three minutes, Heckraft acted on the advice, and carrying a suit-case, crossed the line and climbed the steep, dusty ascent.

He found on arrival at the hotel that he was expected, though no preparation had been made. Young Johnson, who was staying at Inchanga, because the accommodation at Drummond did not suit him, had bespoken a room for him, but he had given no orders in regard to meeting the train, and the manager, as Heckraft soon discovered, belonged to the indolent class which seldom troubles to do more than is actually demanded, seeming unable, or unwilling, to use any initiative in matters of no particular personal interest. The room allotted him was an outside room, apart from the main building altogether, one of several that had been run up hurriedly with due regard for economy, being built of corrugated iron lined with varnished planks. It gave Heckraft the sensation of being confined in a box,—a very hot box, for the building, which was exposed to the full glare of the sun, absorbed the heat and retained it, so that during the daytime it was uninhabitable, and not much better at night. If a cold wind sprung up during the night, or the rain fell, the temperature of the rooms dropped so suddenly as to make them positively unhealthy. In the colonies, Heckraft was aware that a man expects to rough it; but it was a revelation to him that such primitive surroundings should be found so near to a large town.

He went in to lunch. The bill of fare was meagre and ill chosen for the climate and the time of year. Pork was the only meat. He remembered the engi-

neer's rebuke on board the *Ariadne,* and swallowed the unwholesome fare with the philosophic cheerfulness acquired on the voyage. As there was no water supply, other than rain water preserved in large tanks, which in a country of incessant drought is not particularly healthy drinking, he ordered whisky and soda, and wondered whether he would be ruined first in his pocket or his constitution by a beverage which cost seven and six a bottle, and which taken at all hours during the day inclines even a temperate man to become a drunkard. If Inchanga offered something better than this he was not surprised that young Johnson should go there.

He was smoking a cigarette on the roughly made stoep outside his bedroom when Johnson put in an appearance. He apologised in an off-hand manner for not meeting the train. He had as a matter of fact forgotten that Heckraft was coming; as soon as he remembered he had sprinted over in the car.

"So they've put you into Tintown?" he said, glancing disparagingly at the iron shanty. . . . "Full up in the hotel, I suppose. The place is rottenly managed."

Heckraft, quietly surveying the speaker, did not feel disposed to dispute this. He was of the same opinion. Harold Johnson took out a cigarette case and started to smoke. He was a man of about twenty-five, though he looked older, a handsome, fair man, inclined to stoutness, with big, blue, trusting-looking eyes, and very red, full lips. There was something in the face which Heckraft liked, and again something which instinctively repelled him. Johnson belonged to a type that women find more attractive than men. But Heckraft, wishful to be on good terms with his employer's son, determined to start without prejudice; though it was plain that the young man considered him entirely unworthy of special notice. He

had looked him up simply in his capacity of employer; in this capacity also he took him over the plantation, and introduced him to Gommet, the engineer, the only other white man employed on the place. It was evident to Heckraft that Johnson held Gommet in contempt, though the latter, besides being a much older man, was his superior intellectually. He was too clever a man to be engineer on a wattle plantation; but there was a reason for that, which Heckraft learned later, a reason which explained, while it did not excuse, Johnson's supercilious treatment of one who, in equal circumstances, could have left him far behind in the race. The thing which struck Heckraft most, and won his admiration, was the air of sublime and unconscious indifference in which Gommet regarded the other, as a man of greater parts might regard one whose lesser intelligence claimed his special indulgence. He had no time to waste on such men as Harold Johnson, and his manner conveyed as much. The younger man was clearly at a disadvantage and the consciousness of this inclined him to be spiteful.

"Gommet's a rotter," he explained to Heckraft later. . . . "Drinks like a fish. He's married too. . . . Got a decent little wife, living at Maritzburg, I believe. She left him—couldn't stand it. . . . no woman could. I don't believe he cares a tinker's curse either. . . . Keeps an Indian woman at his house, and drinks himself blind every night. He's a good man though, and cheap, or we shouldn't keep him on. But he manages to get through his work all right."

Heckraft made no answer; but he liked Harold Johnson less after that unnecessary confidence. The knowledge that another has a failing does not constitute a reason for publishing the fact.

They had left the works, and now followed a path

through the hotel grounds which was a short cut to the station and to the woods. At a particular point in the path Heckraft halted and stood still to admire the view through a clearing in the trees. It was another and more comprehensive view of the wonderful winding valley and broken ranges of hills which he had first seen from the train. In the pale light of evening, with the early mists gathering thickly and veiling the scene, it was strangely, even disturbingly, beautiful. Hills stretched away on all sides until they faded into the mists and became mere shadow shapes, wan phantom forms, obscured by the gathering fog, yet standing forth grey and vaguely outlined, majestic sentinels of nature guarding the valley of the everlasting hills. And in the foreground more and yet more hills, each long, undulating line showing sharper and more distinct, until the velvety slopes and soft, rounded summits revealed separate shades of colour, of light greens and browns and saffrons mingling with the darker green of the wattles that lined their slopes.

"What a view!" said Heckraft.

The other man surveyed it with accustomed, unappreciative eyes.

"Not half bad," he replied; and added after a silence: "They call that the Valley of a Thousand Hills. I should think the chap who started out to count them must have got tired of the job."

"He certainly did not exaggerate," said Heckraft, as he stared across the valley into the grey mist.

V

NOTWITHSTANDING the necessity for his urgent return to town, young Johnson lingered on at Inchanga for a week after Heckraft's arrival. During that week the plantation saw him on an average for a couple of hours a day. He motored over usually after breakfast, and spent part of the morning riding through the forests with the manager, supervising the work. Heckraft found his assistance after the first day wholly unnecessary. The Coolies who worked on the plantation had been there a long time, and knew more about timber, and the method of stripping bark than the white men; and Heckraft, whenever he was at a loss, found that Gommet could give him all the information he required.

Gommet had worked on the plantation for several years. He had had an idea once of himself acquiring land and going in for wattle planting. The idea had grown more vague of late, though it was not entirely abandoned; but there was less incentive now to become an owner. Where was the use in making a start when life offered nothing further than the improving of a man's condition, and the addition of a few personal comforts? . . . The savour of things was gone. But he managed to imbue Heckraft with his ambition, and some of his old enthusiasm kindled anew, called back to life at sight of the gleam of interest, the purposeful look in the younger man's eyes.

"Got any capital?" he asked Heckraft one day.

The latter nodded.

"We could do it together," he said. "I've got the refusal of a farm between this and Inchanga. . . . two thousand acres. We'd have to put it under wattle, of course. The trees take six years maturing. . . . Being in the fog belt, it suits them, and they go ahead fine."

"I'll have to think about it," Heckraft returned.

"Of course. . . . You mightn't care about the life particularly. I do, you see. But there isn't exactly a fortune in it. Our bark only fetches six pounds a ton; a few years back we made twelve easy. . . . But it's not much of an existence for a man of your years—might almost as well be buried, eh?"

"There doesn't appear to be much excitement offering," Heckraft admitted. —"Though some people seem to find the place attractive."

"You mean Johnson. . . . He's got a girl. Her people are farming a few miles from here. She's taken with his motor car, I imagine."

"Oh! he's well enough to look at in his way to be appreciated for himself."

"Not by her people, though. They're warm folk,—the typical, old-fashioned Boers who live by the land and love it. They don't speak English. The girl had quite a fight to get away to the town and learn the language. Her parents considered the Taal good enough for themselves, and therefore good enough for their children; but Alieta has ideas of her own."

"But a Dutch girl!" Heckraft said, and his tone betrayed all the prejudice of the insular Britisher.

Gommet smiled drily.

"You wait until you have seen Alieta," he said; "and I think you'll agree with me that she's too good to throw herself away on a puppy, even though the puppy happen to be the son of a millionaire."

Heckraft saw Alieta later in the afternoon. He was walking his horse along the road towards the sheds when Johnson overtook him in his car, and slowing down, stopped, and waited for him to come up. He was rather proud of showing off his car, which was a new purchase; he was still more proud of showing off the beauty of the girl who sat in the front seat at his side, taking pleasure in watching the admiration her beauty evoked. He introduced her to Heckraft, when the latter rode up, with difficulty forcing his horse, which was restive, to approach the car, and watched the manager narrowly, curious to note the effect of the girl's loveliness on him, as a connoisseur might be over an object of art which he jealously exhibits to another. But the manager did not gratify him. Whatever of admiration he felt —and he was not more blind to feminine charms than another man—did not reveal itself in his look. His gaze, as it rested upon the joyous young face, expressed more of interested curiosity than any other emotion, though there was pleasure in his eyes too, the pleasure of one who looks upon something wholesome and sweet.

Alieta's was the most attractive form of beauty it is possible to meet, and, so far from representing any particular type, one carried away after a first acquaintance a very vivid impression of frank and lovely girlhood, and only a hazy idea as to the quality of her colouring. She was in reality neither fair nor dark. She possessed a pair of warm, brown, friendly eyes, large eyes that looked out upon life with a happy and fearless confidence; and a warm brown skin, tinted from exposure to the sun she loved. Her hair too was brown at the roots. It was beautiful hair, of varying shades of colour, the ends paling and brightening to golden, so that the little

curls that escaped from under the small, closely-fitting hat gave a first impression of the owner being a blonde, an impression which never quite faded, despite the dark eyes, and the pale olive tint in the skin. A rich colour, uncommon in women bred in hot climates, glowed in her cheeks, and the pretty lips were red as the scarlet geraniums she wore at her breast.

She leant forward and smiled at Heckraft across her lover, observing with appreciation the strong hand on the rein controlling the fidgety horse. Heckraft noticed the fascinating dimple that appeared at the corner of her mouth when she smiled, noticed too that the neck supporting the small head was very long and swan-like; and he judged her to be taller than the average. He also saw that she was slender almost to a fault, and wondered why he had always imagined that Dutchwomen were stout.

"You must be fond of solitude to come all the way from England to a place like this," she said.

"We haven't anything half so fine as this in England," he replied.

The dimple came into play again.

"But it's dull," she insisted. "There isn't much life."

"There are the hills—and other compensations."

"You'll find the hills unsatisfactory companions when you want to converse," Alieta argued.

"Then," he answered, observing her intently, "I shall have recourse to the other compensations."

She looked at him with a slightly puzzled smile that was also faintly amused.

"I wish you'd teach me to recognise them," she said. "I am frequently in need of compensations myself."

But Johnson, who did not altogether approve of the turn the conversation had taken, here intervened.

"You don't need to bother about that," he remarked, resting his large hand heavily on her knee. "You'll be shaking the dust of the place off your shoes before long."

But Alieta only laughed in a provokingly unconvinced way. She liked to dwell on the idea, as children like to play at makė-believe; but it always appeared to her very indefinite that time of which Harold spoke with such certainty on occasions, and at other times with the sullen manner of a boy helping himself to something which he feels if he asked permission would be denied. He had every intention of marrying Alieta, and if opposition threatened, of marrying her secretly. But to Alieta, who was young, and only in love with the idea of being loved, marriage was the indeterminate result of a long and pleasant courtship; and the courtship was of very recent date.

"It wouldn't be so dull if you came more often," she said, with a little display of affection which Heckraft thought very pretty. "But when you are away, what is there to amuse me? . . . only the hills. I haven't Mr. Heckraft's power; the hills don't speak to me. And they don't companion my walks."

"And yet they accompany you," Heckraft said.

"They're always there—yes." She looked at him fixedly with deepening interest, and added with an air of puzzled conviction: "You won't find Drummond dull. You'll be like Mr. Gommet, satisfied to stay here all your days. It's rather nice of you. People who come to these parts are usually so keen to get away."

"Give him a chance. . . . He hasn't been here a week," Johnson interposed. "As for Gommet, he

has his own method of drowning the solitudes. I don't suppose it troubles him what corner of the earth he inhabits provided he can get his 'cure'."

He laughed contemptuously. Alieta, her senses jarred by the bad taste of the remark, looked at him gravely, a tiny pucker between the level, finely pencilled brows, a thin line that was scarcely a frown, and which lost itself beneath the gold curls that waved low over her temples.

"I like Mr. Gommet," she said quietly, and knew not how greatly in saying so she roused the esteem and admiration of one of her listeners. The simple little sentence, conveying in its seriousness a veiled rebuke, won Heckraft's immediate regard. He ranked loyalty in man or woman among the highest virtues, and he judged, not only from Alieta's remark, but from the manner of her utterance, that she would be loyal in her friendships. Johnson received the little speech in an altogether different spirit.

"You don't know as much about him as I do, you see," he said curtly. "And I object to your knowing him at all. He is no companion for you."

Alieta forbore to argue before a third person. She put up a shapely, ungloved hand and stroked his coat, as a woman smooths an animal, rubbing its fur the right way in semi-serious mood.

"Silly!" she said. "As though I am not perfectly aware that Mr. Gommet is far too clever a person to wish to make a companion of me. It is only big boys, like you, that I can hope to amuse. And I can't keep even you in a good temper."

Johnson laughed, despite his annoyance; there was an irresistible seductiveness in Alieta's caressing tones, and, having made a display of authority, he allowed himself to be propitiated. His objection to Gommet was founded on dislike, jealousy did not enter into

the matter; he was too self-complacent to become an easy prey to jealousy, but he would make a bad enemy of the man who aroused the passion in him.

Heckraft watched the by-play while seeming to be fully occupied in controlling his restive mount, which objected to the throbbing of the engine that Johnson had not felt it worth his while to stop, and watching, bethought himself of a remark of Gommet's to the effect that the Dutch girl was too good to throw herself away on a puppy. But he did not attribute her choice to mercenary reasons. She was probably seeking escape from the solitudes of which she complained, and Johnson had opened a door which revealed a fairly attractive vista. It was scarcely surprising that Alieta should stand with reluctant feet on the threshold, viewing the prospect with eager, inquisitive gaze. One day she might step across the threshold, and quite possibly never look back with regret. There are a good many puppies in the world, and some of them make quite reputable husbands.

He brought his horse up beside the car. Johnson was preparing to drive on, and Alieta was addressing a remark to him across the latter's substantial person.

"You must come and see the farm," she said. "It's a short ride, or a long walk, from here. . . . Odsani, close to Inchanga. My father and mother will be pleased to see you, but unless you talk Dutch I shall have to interpret."

"If Dutch presents no very formidable difficulty I will attempt to acquire the language," he said. "In any case, since you give me permission, I will visit Odsani very shortly."

Alieta smiled at him.

"Ik zal jou verwacht," she said.

And Heckraft, having no answer to a remark

which signified that the speaker would expect him, raised his hat as the car proceeded on its way, leaving him in a cloud of dust, careering about the road on a prancing horse that was more spirited than its appearance warranted.

"He rides well," Alieta observed to her companion, looking behind her through the dust-cloud at the rearing animal and its rider. "I believed it was only a Dutchman who could manage a horse like that."

"Dutchmen can't ride for nuts," Johnson answered rudely. But Alieta remained unmoved.

"They are the men who understand the breeding and management of horses in this country better than anyone else," she asserted. "I can't allow you to deny my men the credit due to them."

He smiled at her lazily.

"What a pertinacious meisje it is," he said.

Heckraft dismounted at the stables and walked across to the works. Gommet was still busy directing the operation of loading and discharging sacks of the bark that had been cut up that day. Heckraft seated himself on a stack of timber, and watched the bark sliding down the shafts into the open necks of the sacks, to be pressed down by automatic stampers set in motion by the attendant Coolie. It was all so beautifully simple, and, as Gommet was fond of explaining, not so very expensive either as machinery went.

"I've just met Miss Van der Vyver," he said, tapping his gaitered leg idly with the riding whip he carried.

Gommet looked round.

"I heard them pass," he returned. "That fellow drives like Jehu, the son of Nimshi. . . . Well, what did you think of her?—Pretty, eh?"

"The term is inadequate," Heckraft answered. "But

apart from her appearance, she is quite remarkable,—a girl with tact, and great personal charm."

"I told you she was too good for Johnson. If she had the opportunity of meeting men she wouldn't marry a puppy."

He took some cotton waste from his pocket and mopped the perspiration from his brow.

"Didn't strike you that she was in love with him, I suppose? She's tired of the sight of hills and wattles, I take it, and finds the other thing a sort of outlet. But there's only one valid excuse for marriage . . . . every other reason ends in disappointment."

Heckraft was surprised. He had not been prepared for a discourse on love and marriage from Gommet. Then he remembered what he had heard of Gommet's own unfortunate experience, and his sympathy went out to this man, who, save in a vague, indirect manner, which conveyed the impression that he thought about the thing, never referred to his private affairs. So far as he was concerned that part of his life was the end of a volume which was closed and put back on the shelf. But the contents of the volume were ever present in his mind.

"She's for trying her wings," he added, having further recourse to the cotton waste. "Tragedy often follows when the young birds leave the nest."

VI

THE Van der Vyvers' farm, Odsani, was separated from the wattle plantation only by the barbed wire fencing which marked its boundary. It is easy enough to converse across barbed wire, if not so simple to surmount this efficacious barrier, as Heckraft proved quite early in his acquaintance with Alieta Van der Vyver.

He discovered the boundary fence by accident while riding round to inspect the fire-breaks skirting the plantation. That it was the fencing of Odsani he knew, even before he saw Alieta, mounted on a big bay horse, coming towards him on the other side of the fence. Alieta had drawn rein on that occasion and greeted him with unmistakable pleasure. And after that day it seemed to him quite natural that he should ride regularly in the same direction at much about the same hour. At first he met her only occasionally, but after a while these encounters were more frequent, and owed less and less to chance, until it became the recognised thing for them to make for a given place and await each other's coming.

"You are so methodical," Alieta said to him once; "I could set my watch by you."

"I would sooner miss my meals than miss this pleasant break in the day," he replied.

Her smiling face betrayed her pleasure.

"I am letting you into the secret of where I find my compensations," he added, laughing.

"You are helping me in a measure to discover a few for myself. Through you I am learning to appreciate the hills."

"Yes!" he said, and looked pleased. "Some evening, if you will ride with me, I will interpret their language for you, as you interpret between Mrs. Van der Vyver and me. When you understand them you will enjoy their company."

"With you as interpreter, yes," she conceded.

And neither the girl nor the man was aware that they were on the fringe of a deeper regard than that of mere friendship. They drifted into it unconsciously, taking pleasure in one another's society,—two lonely human beings, full of the joy of life and a great love of humanity. The man was ten years older than the girl; compared with her youth he appeared staid and middle-aged, a safe and agreeable companion, one to make a friend of; and with the substantial figure of Harold Johnson looming in the foreground of their minds, the idea of falling in love did not occur to either; only occasionally Alieta found herself comparing this new friend with her lover, and invariably it was Johnson who suffered by the comparison. In this there was no intentional disloyalty; but Alieta was apt to be critical in respect of those she loved. Love was not blind in her case, it possessed exceptionally clear vision, and its demands were inclined to be exacting.

It was Mrs. Van der Vyver who was the first to awake to the fact that the manager came rather often to Odsani, and, since he could not converse either with herself or her husband, the inference was that he came to see Alieta. Mrs. Van der Vyver was too thoroughly Dutch at heart to be in favour of an English husband for her daughter; but she had overcome her prejudices to some extent in the case of Har-

old Johnson on account of his worldly possessions; much gold, and plenty good morgen, give a man a right to consideration. If Alieta were determined to marry the rich man's son there was no very great reason against it, but there were very grave objections to a marriage with the rich man's manager. Mrs. Van der Vyver had no use for a son-in-law who came wooing with empty hands.

She gave Alieta no verbal warning, but one evening she showed her disapproval after the time-honoured custom of her people. She brought in the candle. The performance of this rite lost in effect since it conveyed nothing to the mind of Heckraft, who had not been long enough in the country to be aware that a guest was expected to take his leave when the candle was burnt out, or that he might gauge the extent of his welcome by the length of candle provided. In this instance Mrs. Van der Vyver allowed only two inches. That would prove to the unwelcome suitor the strength of her disapproval. At the same time that she brought the candle in and set it upon the table, she removed two longer lengths from the piano and bore them away with her. Heckraft merely concluded that the supply was running short.

"I am going to bed," she said, looking at Alieta severely from the doorway. "If we all turned night into day there would be no work done."

Alieta translated this for Heckraft's benefit, giving the gist of the remark shorn of its insinuation. Mrs. Van der Vyver listened to her daughter's glib English with a frown. It was unwise to give to the children an education superior to their parents, she often affirmed; it put one at a disadvantage. If she could have her day over again she would not repeat that mistake.

Heckraft wished the old lady good-night, using

one of the phrases Alieta had taught him. It had ceased to be a matter of surprise to him that the host and hostess should retire to their room and leave him to be entertained by the daughter of the house; under no consideration would the old couple have remained out of bed after nine o'clock. The night was given them for rest so that they could more profitably employ the day. The man or woman who kept late hours was no better than an idler.

When her mother had left the room, Alieta rose and extinguished the sorry illumination of the solitary candle. She perfectly understood its import; and though she deplored the conservatism of her mother's principles, she also respected it. Her parents were descendants of the old Dutch settlers, and they were very little further advanced than their primitive forbears. How this, their youngest and only unmarried child, had sprung from the branch of so deeply rooted a tree was difficult to understand; it seemed as though she must be a graft.

"It is much nicer to sit in the moonlight," Alieta said, as she deftly snuffed the smoking wick between her fingers, and then came back to the window. "And a light only attracts the mosquitoes."

"That amount of light," Heckraft answered in his sublime ignorance, "wouldn't attract anything. But you're right; the night is superb. Let us sit out on the stoep."

They stepped over the sill, and stood in the moonlight, looking across the garden to the distant hills, shrouded in a cloud-like mist that resembled drifts of snow in the white light, snow which, reversing the natural order, lay heavy in the valleys and only sparsely covered the heights.

Alieta leaned against one of the clumsy stanchions which supported the verandah shade, her small head

thrown back, showing the long slender column of her throat. Heckraft stood beside her, not looking at her. They were both intent on the beauty of the scene that stretched before their gaze, and neither of them consciously alive to the fact of how greatly the presence of the other assisted their powers of appreciation. It was a warm, windless night. The fireflies were flitting in and out among the trees, and the air was fragrant with the scent of the wattle flower, the creamy, feathery blossoms which have a sweet, and yet somewhat acrid, scent when in full flower, as the trees were at that season.

Alieta drew in long whiffs of it in silent content, and Heckraft turned from the contemplation of the hills, and saw her leaning there in graceful unconscious pose, the tall, slender young body supported by the clumsy woodwork at her back, the moonlight striking full on the upturned, earnest face; and in that moment, as though a searchlight had been flashed into the inner recesses of his consciousness, it was revealed to him beyond question that he had in this out of the way corner of the world met the one woman who could interest him above all others, the only woman, he felt, who was destined to be an influence in his life. Adversity had led him to her, and Nature, who recognises no obstacles where hearts beat in perfect accord, was working her will with them for the furtherance of her own ends. Abruptly he awoke out of his dreaming to the reality of things, to the certainty that if not checked, this growing intimacy would create for both an intolerable situation. He caught the flash of diamonds in the moonlight when she moved her hand, diamonds which another man had placed upon her finger. The sight of the gems angered him. By what human right had this unappreciative, so much younger man stepped in and fore-

stalled him with the only woman he had ever cared for?

"You are very silent," Alieta said suddenly. "Why do you look at me so?"

The obvious reply to that question hovered on his lips but did not pass them. Instead he said:

"After all, it is a lonely life, this."

Which remark was the outcome of reflections induced by the sight of the ring upon her finger, the symbol of an escape from the solitudes of the everlasting hills. Alieta gazed at him thoughtfully.

"So you are finding that out?" she said.

"I was thinking of you," he answered, with his customary directness. "It is too much to imagine that you could settle for ever in the Valley of a Thousand Hills."

He smiled at her as he spoke, and passed his hand over his hair, as was a habit with him when perplexed or otherwise moved. Alieta drew herself more erect.

"I like the way in which you think and speak of the hills," she said irrelevantly. "You are teaching me to love them. Whenever I look at them now I see them with your eyes. The other morning when I was riding before breakfast and came upon the valley unexpectedly round the bend of the road, the beauty of it stirred me so profoundly that I wanted to weep. The sun was just flushing the sky, and the white clouds were pouring over the hillsides in foaming cascades. I've seen it like that often. I've admired it, of course, but it never stirred me out of myself before you opened my eyes. You have taught me to realise the privilege of living among beautiful surroundings."

"One needs human companionship, too," he urged, in a half-hearted attempt to damp her ardour.

"Yes, I suppose so." Alieta laughed softly. "Since

I've learnt to love the hills," she said, "I haven't felt lonely any more."

The frank ingenuousness of this admission left him with nothing to say, but it became vitally clear and important to him that this pleasant intimacy must terminate if a man intended playing the game of life as honour intended it to be played. He held the ordinary code in regard to such matters: the theory that all is fair in love and war occurred to him as a convenient and sorry cloak beneath which to conceal the treachery it sought to excuse. To pursue the friendship further, he would need to lower his standard, for already he perceived that they had reached the point where friendship assimilates those deeper emotions which sex in obedience to natural laws promotes. It would not be fair to either to let the thing go on and simply drift. And he had a rooted antipathy to drifting. He had acted helmsman in his own life hitherto; he had no intention now of relinquishing his grasp because his craft was sailing in troubled waters. The more difficult the steering the more need to stand steady with hand upon the tiller, braced for any emergency. But he realised even while he made his decision that a fresh and greater loss than anything he had yet experienced was his; and the knowledge left him with a sense of strong resentment, and a bitter feeling towards Johnson which he knew to be unjust. It was absurd to hate a man because he chanced to be before one in the field,—as reasonably dislike the man who touches the tape first in a race. The thing struck him as mean.

And then Alieta's voice broke in upon his musing, soothing and sweet and low pitched, with the new caressing quality in its tones which always crept into them now when they were alone together.

"I have felt lately that if I went away—if I left

the hills, I should have to come back. There's a bit of myself buried here. . . . I suppose it's because I was born here. My feet are rooted in the soil."

"Young trees bear transplanting," he answered quietly.

"You think so? . . . You think that I'll be able to turn my back on—this? I'm inclined to rebel at my lot as a woman. Why should the woman always have to tear herself up by the roots to follow the man?"

"It's the law of life," he replied.

"Life as we have made it."

"No. Look at the wild things. . . . Take the finks, for instance; you have plenty of opportunity of observing their habits. The male bird builds the nest and takes his mate to it."

Alieta laughed.

"And if she doesn't approve of the home he has built for her, she has been known to pull it to pieces."

"That's a precedent that many a woman has followed," he said.

"Yes; I'm like that," Alieta responded. "Considering all that a woman has to renounce she is justified in being exacting. And when she destroys the home, though she is usually held in blame, the fault, if one could look into the inner lives of others impartially, would be found not infrequently to lie with the founder of the home. For woman is a homy person, and not by nature destructive."

"You are very loyal to your sex," he said, with a note of approval in his voice.

"Yes. I like my own sex. But I wish to be fair. . . . There is a broken home not so very far away; and I can't determine whether the woman was justified there. The provocation was great,—it must have

been. But it's rather selfish to throw off one's responsibilities because the collar galls."

"You see," he said, smiling, "you are not altogether consistent. You don't really approve of the destructive finks."

"That's not quite fair; you are twisting my meaning," Alieta objected. "When the reason is sufficient, when it makes for the greater good, then I say the woman is justified; but when it is merely a selfish evasion of unpleasantness, then she is cowardly and altogether in the wrong. We can't live only for ourselves."

"No," he answered, feeling that her argument fitted his own case. "Life would be much more simple if we could."

"I wonder!" Alieta mused, and stretched her long arms gracefully above her head, bringing them down slowly, with the hands clasped, until they rested upon her hair. "It seems to me that it would make life rather more complex."

"After all, you're right," he said, looking at her quickly. "If each individual went his own way it would do away with all combination, and combination forms the basis of successful achievement whether of statesmanship or domestic affairs. . . ."

When later he left her, he puzzled that she, a girl, should so often lead his thoughts towards abstruse subjects, and not infrequently dominate and direct his judgment in regard to matters he would scarcely have thought her qualified to form opinions on. Alieta was one of the few women he had been brought into contact with who had trained her reasoning faculties. He recognised that it was this quality in her that made her so companionable.

VII

A LIGHT in Gommet's window when Heckraft rode back that evening, after leaving Alieta somewhat earlier than was his custom when visiting Odsani, prompted him to dismount and go within. Gommet was smoking in the sitting-room, Sutton's book on the wattle industry open on the table before him, together with a memorandum book in which he was making copious notes. The sight of the book, of the man's quiet absorption in his occupation, set Heckraft's mind working in a new direction. Quite suddenly, and without any conscious effort at decision, he knew that a determination was arrived at, that his mind was firmly fixed in its purpose to fall in with the other man's ideas, and whatever the risk, however remote the prospect of fortune, to put his whole interest in the soil,—to become an owner, a permanent resident among the hills.

"Hallo!" said Gommet, looking up. "I hoped you'd give me a hail to-night. I heard you ride past an hour or so back."

He was perfectly aware of where the other had been. He had been quietly observant of Heckraft's movements for some time, and, being a man more ready of thought than of speech, he had come to a quite natural, and not altogether incorrect, deduction on the matter of the manager's preference for Alieta Van der Vyver's society.

Heckraft took a chair and sat forward, with his arms folded on the table.

"Working out figures, eh?" he said.

The engineer put down the stump of pencil he had been working with, and nodded briefly.

"I'm always at it," he admitted with a faint smile. "It's become an obsession with me. . . . And yet I'm not so keen on the project but that at times I feel that it's not worth while. If it wasn't that I object so strongly to being a paid man, I shouldn't nurse the idea as I do. You see, a salaried man with my particular weakness is liable to be kicked out of his job at any moment. . . . Also, it denies me the privilege of being able to freely express to young Johnson my candid opinion of him."

"And you think that a sufficient reason for risking your capital?"

"Not altogether. . . . I've got a fancy, you see, that I could make the farm pay. The only trouble is to get anyone with the necessary share of capital to believe in me."

"I haven't a doubt of you," Heckraft interposed.

"It's wattle bark as a paying industry you doubt, I take it, then?"

"I allow to being a bit dubious there. There is admittedly no unlimited demand for wattle bark, and seeing how much land in Natal and elsewhere is being put into wattle, the market is bound to be affected. It's the small growers who will suffer most from the depression."

"Even allowing that," Gommet returned confidently, "the demand for good quality bark will not decrease to such an appreciable extent that it won't permit of a margin of profit. If you're going to work for a fortune, then give up the idea at once; if you're content to work for a living, wattles will supply it."

"A living will suffice," Heckraft put in.

"Besides," Gommet proceeded, warming to his sub-

ject, "the changes mooted in the treatment of the bark will make for a greater prosperity. It will give a tremendous impetus to the industry when we extract the tannin before shipment. We don't do enough of our own work in this country; we're so fond of sending out the raw materials and giving to other countries the labour we ought to keep in our own. There's a lack of enterprise,—of ambition, among South Africans—or has been in the past. We're waking up now; and I see a greater, if less spasmodic, prosperity for this country in the future. When we're finished with the monopolists—damn them!—and have a proper grip on our own independence and individual worth, —when we've grown out of regarding this as a young country still requiring a wet nurse, then we can look to see South Africa a country for South Africans to be proud of belonging to, not, as the average Englishman regards it to-day, as a market-place for his commercial abilities, the results of which he retires to the mother-land to spend. That's why to-day we are a lesser power in Africa than the Dutch. To the Dutchman this land is Home, to the average Britisher it is simply exile."

"And do you think the average Britisher will ever get over that feeling entirely?" Heckraft inquired skeptically. "Man, have you got over it? . . . Isn't the love of Home as the very marrow of your bones?"

"That's just it," Gommet answered. "But we've got to remedy that. We don't want merely the capitalist out here, the bird of passage,—we don't want only the weak lungs, and weaker principles. We want the emigrant,—the man who comes out voluntarily,— the man without a stake in the old country, who will settle on the land, and rear children on it, to take his place and rear others to come after them. That's what we want, and if we hope to make a British Col-

ony proper of this, it will have to come. . . . I'm not against the Union, though I think in the matter of the double language the thing is carried to extremes. We don't want divided interests between Boer and Briton; the interest of the South African should be identical. There's room for both. The Dutch are agriculturalists, we are mechanics; they are conservative, we are progressive; it is a good combination. Brotherly love will grow out of it,—and inter-marriage."

"That's been going on for some time," Heckraft returned.

"I know it. I want to see more of it yet."

"You're a thorough Unionist," Heckraft said with a laugh. "There's no half and half measure about you."

"No; only in the matter of the language. I should like to kill that. I resent getting my mail stamped *'Unie van Zuid Afrika,'* and reading a double notice over every government concern. Sentiment is a rotten foundation to attempt building a virile structure upon. If the Taal had any dignified claim to be considered, one could sympathise with its struggle to live; but it has served its purpose, and should now be relegated to the past with the obsolete and inefficient inventions which served in a less advanced age. It has no literary value; it is of no use in any sense outside the Union; it's of precious little use in it. It will kill itself in time; but because we are a nation of sentimentalists we give it a renewed lease of life by encouraging its use. We want another prophet to arise, a second John Cecil Rhodes—not necessarily to carry on Rhodes' work, but to take up a line of his own, and pull the country successfully through the difficult period of transition."

"Two great brains don't usually follow in such rapid succession," Heckraft remarked.

"A great brain!" Gommet repeated musingly. . . . "A great brain—and a great unscrupulousness. . . . It takes both to qualify the blundering of the sentimentalist. You'll notice that the men who have achieved the biggest things have been mostly unscrupulous,—it's a necessary qualification to fling in the balance against the finer attribute. . . . I want to see a great statesman arise in Africa, a man with large ideas, and sufficient personality and force to drive his ideas through. The majority are not sufficiently disinterested. We are place-seekers, time-servers,—bent on making our pile, or getting a knighthood. Self-interest steps in and stultifies our natures. That's the reason the prophets are so rare, the reason, too, why they are growing rarer as our civilization advances. The man who works for recognition, for advancement, can never plunge fearlessly forward; he inclines an ear here, an ear there, till, however brilliant his promise, his judgment becomes warped and fettered, and he falls into line with the rest. . . . He becomes something of a fixed planet, no longer a brilliant shooting star. It's a shooting star Africa needs; they can keep the planets in England, where nothing appears to be stirring except the political agitators—principally the Suffragettes."

He laughed, and rising abruptly, went to a cupboard in the room, and produced whisky and glasses.

"Fill up," he said to Heckraft, and mixed himself a glass. "Here's to the Suffragettes," he said, tossing off the drink. "They at least are not satisfied to sit quiet under injustice. They teach us a lesson in courage and devotion and disinterestedness. It's a grand thing for man or woman to have a great cause to fight for. It's the Suffragettes we may look to to produce the prophets of the future."

Heckraft was not greatly interested in the subject.

He regarded the feminist agitation as a morbid growth that had sprung up unaccountably amid a nation's prosperous ease to disturb and irritate peaceable citizens with its hysterical and incomprehensible demands. It was a phase, he imagined, in the world's history that would die with the same unexpectedness as it appeared to him to have been born. It did not trouble him seriously because he had never seriously considered it.

"Your prophet, if you look to the Suffragettes to produce him, will be a fairly destructive prophet," he said drily.

"He'll be virile, and not afraid to brave opposition, anyhow. He will not be easy to entice from the road he sets forth to travel. He'll march straight ahead for his goal."

"And when he can't get his own way, he'll break things, I suppose? I'm not dazzled at the prospect. The Suffragettes don't appeal to me. I was quite sympathetic towards the women's cause till they resorted to disorderly conduct. That has alienated my sympathy entirely. There are bigger questions of the Empire to be settled than the woman's vote."

"Man, you think that? . . . Why, the women and children are the Empire,—the vital and important part of it. I don't consider the women have lost anything in forfeiting your sympathy. And I rather expect that's the view they take with regard to the sympathy of the public generally. What benefit is your sympathy to them? Negative help is no help. You personally, and those who think like you, are responsible for the Suffragette. She has arisen after half a century of sympathetic apathy,—and you are one of her unnatural parents, unnatural because, having begotten her, you are for disowning your work. Should we men remain passively acquiescent

if a concerted demand of ours met with such apathetic indifference, and was shelved time after time? I rather fancy we should get up and break things too. I know I should—and they'd be heads, not windows. I'd see somebody suffered besides myself."

"It occurs to me that it's agitating, and not wattles, you ought to go in for," Heckraft interposed with a laugh. Gommet laughed with him.

"If a man is going to be an agitator he has got to keep sober," he observed, "otherwise he'll have no influence. And an agitator without influence is merely an annoyance."

"He is an annoyance in any case," Heckraft retorted.

Gommet refilled his glass.

"Only to those whose comfort is threatened. We're so damned selfish; that's why we object to change; we can't get away from the personal view. We are so afraid how this reform, or that, will affect our individual circumstance that we oppose it straight away in order to be on the safe side. But progress is a mighty river which cannot be stemmed; and those who seek to hinder its advance by attempting to dam it, only slightly divert its channel, or, as more often happens,—take the case of the Suffragettes—cause it to overflow its banks with disastrous results."

Gommet lifted his glass, took a drink therefrom, and eyed Heckraft steadily over the rim.

"You'll say, I suppose, that it's because I have nothing to lose that I'm so ready to welcome the rush of modern progress? In which case, allowing there is something in that argument, I assert that it is a good thing for the world that there are so many in it with little to risk. If wealth narrows the sympathies, let it remain with the few. Besides, it's good for

man—for woman too—to have to strive for existence; it brings out qualities of endurance and self-reliance that a comfortable leisure never develops. . . . And that brings me back to the starting point. If you go in with me for this wattle scheme, it will mean harder work than you're accustomed to, and a greater uncertainty. You know now that as long as you give satisfaction you'll keep your job; the question when you're an owner will be whether your job will keep you. There's a distinction between those two points which appeals strongly to me—but, then, I'm not afraid of risks."

Heckraft drummed softly on the table-cloth with his fingers, and fidgeted with the tumbler of whisky which failed to keep pace with the rapidly diminishing contents of Gommet's glass.

"I don't know that I'm especially afraid of risks either," he answered. "The fact is, when I called in here to-night, I purposed telling you that I'd made up my mind on the matter, but your unwonted eloquence left me no opportunity."

Gommet grinned.

"I don't often gas like that," he said. He favoured Heckraft with a long puzzled scrutiny. "It's odd," he added after a pause, "how you draw a man out. It's not what you say either. I don't talk readily to many people. . . . And that recalls another suggestion I had it in mind to make. You're not comfortable at the hotel, you say. Then, why not shift your traps here? I've a spare room, and Rudgubadi cooks very well. You'd get decently served. And it works out two ways,—we'd keep the money in the firm. If we're going to be partners, that is a consideration."

Heckraft nodded.

"Your business qualities are sufficiently sound to minimise the risks you mentioned awhile since," he

said, smiling. "I foresee our future labours crowned with a fair success."

"We'll drag a living out of the ground," Gommet said with a certain dogged obstinacy. "But if we start planting at once it will take from five to six years before we can look for a return."

"I suppose so. But we'll not throw up this job with any undue haste."

"No," Gommet rejoined, and looked up with a contortion of the facial muscles that resembled a twisted grin. "Only when young Johnson discovers, as he is bound to do, that we've bought a farm, he'll make that an excuse for trying to get rid of you."

"Why of me particularly?"

"Well, of both of us—but you in any case."

"But Johnson has no grudge against me," Heckraft insisted.

"Oh! he's a queer chap," Gommet replied fragmentarily. "Laughs with his nose, and is mean with his money. Don't pin your faith on his good will because he appears friendly. He'll do you down one day."

"Rot!" Heckraft ejaculated.

"I daresay it is. Never mind that; it's not worth considering. Let's get to business. There's any amount of detail I want to go into with you."

Gommet took up his pencil again, and plunged straightway into a business talk.

VIII

ALIETA VAN DER VYVER was puzzled. Morning after morning she waited at the boundary fence, but Heckraft did not join her. Every evening she looked to see him ride out to Odsani, and he did not come. She wondered why he should so suddenly neglect his friends, and was hurt by his behaviour, as well as puzzled to account for it. If he had found other interests, he might remember that he had taught her to depend largely on himself for the break in the day's monotony, and find occasion to devote a little of his time to her. His defection, however, pleased Mrs. Van der Vyver. This suitor with the unlined pockets had accepted his dismissal as she had meant he should; there was no further cause for uneasiness on that head. To Alieta she gave sole charge of the dairy, observing that Alieta showed signs of restlessness, and being well aware that work is the best antidote for mental unrest. It was too great leisure that was responsible for the breeding of idle fancies in the mind of youth.

Alieta took up the extra work without comment. It tied her somewhat, but was not on the whole uncongenial. She had been brought up on the simple principle that one should earn the food one ate; that the bread of independence is sweet, and the labour of one's hands a dignified satisfaction. It was one of the tenets of her childhood with which she was thoroughly in sympathy. That woman should shirk her share in the day's toil, and be content to accept

everything from the man was a condition of parasitism that would have lowered her sense of her sex' importance in human affairs, and Alieta held her sex in very good esteem.

It was somewhat strange that it never occurred to Alieta that the extent to which she missed Heckraft's society was unusual between friends. She had grown so used to the position of affairs with regard to her relationship to Harold Johnson, had accepted Heckraft so unquestioningly as a friend, that the danger of the growing intimacy was not apparent to her as it had become to him. It was not until he ceased his visits that she realised how much his friendship meant to her, how greatly she missed it.

"When I meet him again," she told herself, "I will ask him what I have done that he never comes to see me any more."

But when she did meet him a few weeks later a strange shyness came over her, and the words with which she had meant to reproach him found no utterance.

She was riding along the road one morning in the direction of the station when Heckraft came out upon her from the cover of the wattles. He reined in his horse immediately, and an unmistakable look of pleasure chased the gravity from his face. Alieta felt herself flushing unaccountably. The readiness which usually characterised her speech deserted her, and all she found to say was the baldest of conventional greetings. He leant over and shook hands. Alieta, unprepared, and oddly disconcerted at the meeting, dropped her riding whip in her embarrassment.

"I'm clumsy," she said; the vexed colour dyeing her cheeks as he swung himself from the saddle and stooped for it where it lay in the dust of the road.

He handed the whip up to her, and remained stand-

ing in the road beside her horse with the reins of his own animal over his arm.

"It's a long time since I've seen you," he said, his eyes on her face. "Quite a lot of things have happened to me within the last month."

"What sort of things?" she asked.

"I've shifted my quarters, for one thing. I'm tent companion with Gommet now. And I've become a landowner."

Alieta opened her eyes in surprise.

"We've bought a farm," he said.

"I knew Mr. Gommet thought of buying Nooitgedacht," she replied.

"That's the place," he said. "We've gone in together. It now remains to be seen how soon we become bankrupt. . . . What does Nooitgedacht mean, by the way?"

"Never thought of."

"That rather fits, doesn't it?" he said, and looked at her musingly. "I never thought of it when I came out—never thought of becoming a landowner and settling out here, I mean. And now ——" He looked about him, and then back into her face.— "Now," he added, "I suppose I'll finish out my span among these hills."

Alieta rubbed her horse's neck idly with the little hide whip he had restored to her, moving the whip lightly backwards and forwards along the satin coat.

"And does that thought satisfy you?" she asked, without raising her eyes.

"I own I have nursed larger ambitions," he replied. "But after all, so long as a man fill his days with honest industry what more is there for him to do?

"At least," she said, and smiled suddenly, "it means we shall keep you as a neighbour."

"That's kind of you," he answered, resting his hand beside hers on her horse's neck.

There followed a brief pause, a pause during which thoughts formed themselves into words in both minds which neither gave voice to, the inarticulate expression of impulsive ideas prompted by propinquity and natural inclination. Heckraft was tempted to say many things he dared not, and Alieta was tormented with a desire to ask simply:

"Why is it you never come now to the old haunts?"

"I suppose," she said presently, breaking the silence, "you have been unusually busy of late?"

"Yes," he answered briefly. "There's been a lot to see to."

"This new interest must take up much of your leisure."

"All of it," he returned. "Gommet doesn't know what fatigue is, and he won't let me off. He's for having the land ploughed up next week preparatory to planting."

"Who's going to plant for you?" Alieta inquired.

"Oh! we're getting a competent man with a gang of boys to do the work. It's running risks, of course; but there's nothing else for it."

"And then you'll give up here?"

They looked at one another.

"That will have to come too eventually," he replied.

"There's no boundary fence between Odsani and Nooitgedacht," she said, and blushed. "You'll be further away."

"You forget," he returned, smiling faintly, "you'll be further away still. It is you who will make the first move."

Alieta made no response, but into the brown eyes flashed a look that was slightly mutinous. Why did he always remind her of the coming change in her

life? He seemed to take it for granted that her marriage loomed in the immediate foreground of future events.

Heckraft patted the horse's neck thoughtfully, and in doing so his hand accidentally touched hers. The emotional tension to which both were strung was sufficiently strained to cause a mutual embarrassment at the contact which so trifling an accident could not at another time have brought about. Heckraft was conscious of his quickened pulses, of the mad coursing of the blood in his veins, as he muttered a hasty apology and withdrew his hand; at the same moment, helping him in some measure to the recovery of his composure, while adding in an equal degree to Alieta's discomfiture, a motor car flashed round the curve of the road and stopped dead beside them.

"Hallo!" cried Harold Johnson's surprised voice.

There was a ring of dissatisfaction in the voice, an expression of suspicious inquiry in his eyes as they took in the scene. He wondered angrily at the time, and later demanded of Alieta, why she allowed his manager to stand stroking her hand in the roadway.

"You didn't expect to see me," he said, with a meaning in his tones which did not escape Alieta.

She turned a crimson, decidedly angry face towards him. Heckraft was fully occupied in holding his horse, which had reared at the approach of the motor, and showed a disposition to bolt. It occasioned Johnson a savage satisfaction to observe the trouble the brute was giving. Alieta also experienced satisfaction of a different nature in watching the exhibition of strength. The masterly manner in which the man controlled the nervous animal aroused her admiration. Removing her glance from Johnson's face in order to watch the conflict, she surveyed the scene in the road with an interest that secretly angered him in its de-

tachment from himself. For the first time in his life he knew what it was to feel jealous. A doubt crept into his mind as to his certain possession of her, and the doubt enhanced her value a thousand fold in his eyes. He was as a man who, having found a treasure in the wilderness, and being carelessly confident of his possession, having taken no precaution to either hide, or secure, it to himself, now realised that other eyes had discovered his prize, and that unless he asserted at once his prior right to possession other hands would reach forth and gather up the treasure he had felt it no immediate necessity to claim.

"You do not give me much of a welcome," he said.

Heckraft having got his horse fairly under control, Alieta found time to look round.

"You cause so much disturbance by your appearance," she said, "I have no breath to welcome you with."

"Now that you have found your breath, you might say you are glad to see me," he suggested.

She laughed.

"Have you any serious doubts on that head?" she asked.

"I'll have to break this brute of his antipathy to motors," Heckraft remarked, as, after three ineffectual attempts to mount, he finally gained the saddle, and rode the nervous animal close to the car. "He shies at anything. One has to be constantly on the alert when riding him."

"He spilt a man once, and did for him," Johnson said, grinning. "I bought him cheap after the mishap."

Alieta looked at him sharply.

"Then I don't think you ought to keep him for your managers to ride."

"There are other mounts at the stables," he an-

swered indifferently. "There's no obligation for anyone to ride that particular horse if he's scared of him."

Heckraft laughed shortly. The speech so nearly resembled a challenge in its covert reflection on his courage that he felt it incumbent on him to take it up.

"This is the only decent horse you've got, except the animal Gommet uses," he retorted. "And I'm not easily scared."

"We don't provide a special mount for Gommet," Johnson answered; "his work doesn't require it. If you choose to risk your neck riding that brute, it's your lookout."

He descended from the car and went round to Alieta's side for the purpose of helping her to dismount.

"Come," he said; "I'm going to drive you back. Heckraft will take your horse. One of the Coolies can bring it out."

But Alieta, resenting the manner in which he imposed this task on the manager without even troubling to consult him, refused to dismount.

"I prefer to ride," she said. "It is troubling Mr. Heckraft unnecessarily. And I don't trust Fleetfoot to any Coolie. He doesn't object to motors. I'll ride beside you."

"Very well."

Johnson's tone was sulkily acquiescent. He turned away and took his seat again in the car.

"I'll see you later," he called to Heckraft curtly, as the car began to move. Alieta stayed to take a more friendly farewell; and Heckraft felt a sense of angry disgust rise within him as he watched her ride through the cloud of dust raised by the swiftly travelling motor in order to overtake it. If a man could treat a woman like that before marriage, he reflected,

it augured a very uncertain chance of happiness for the woman afterwards.

"You are displeased about something," Alieta said, as she cantered her horse beside the car, which slowed down at her approach.

"Isn't it enough to displease a man," he returned gloomily, "to come upon the girl he is engaged to spooning with his manager in the open road?"

"That is a very gross misstatement," Alieta answered with dignity.

"He was holding your hand. . . . What the devil do you mean by allowing Heckraft to stand stroking your hand in the roadway? Are you in love with the fellow? . . . Or is it merely your vanity leading him on to a flirtation?"

"You forget yourself," she answered in a dangerously level voice. "When you speak to me like that, I must protect myself from insult by refusing to answer you."

Her manner subdued the man. He became apologetic and self-explanatory. He had not meant anything by his words; he had spoken in the heat of the moment. When a man had been starved for two months, it was rough on him that the first glimpse he caught of the girl he had hungered for should reveal her in a compromising attitude with another man, no matter how simple the explanation of that position might be.

"I'm a jealous fool, I know, but I can't stand it," he jerked out, not looking at the girl, but at the road ahead with sombre, intent gaze. "I've been wanting to get here for weeks, but the governor has kept my nose to the grindstone till I feel fairly exasperated. I've been up country most of the time, fooling round on business another man might have undertaken equally well—better, very likely. I'm going to put a

stop to it. . . . I'm going to have it out with him. . . . It's ridiculous, this waiting. . . . I want to get married, and I don't see any damn reason why I shouldn't. We'll get married at once, Alieta, and I'll take you out of this for good. You shan't see a wattle plantation for the rest of your days."

He turned his head and looked at her. Alieta rode beside the car very silent, with her face strangely still and composed. As he jerked his head round, she moved hers, and her steady eyes met his.

"There is no reason why we should wait. . . . You're ready?" he said.

"I don't know."

She kept her grave, unflinching eyes on his. The steadiness of their look disconcerted him. There was that about her, a kind of quiet force that stood for power, which frequently had him at a disadvantage. While conscious of it in a vague way, he was far from understanding it. It formed one of the intangible discords between them.

"But you—wanted it once," he almost stuttered. "Not so very long ago you said you'd be thankful to get away." He paused and stared at her, the colour deepening in his face. "That was before Heckraft came," he added.

Alieta felt the thrust; it took her unawares, and embarrassed her to a degree which entirely swamped her anger. She owed it to herself to still that ugly suspicion. After all, there was some justification for the doubt of her which was shaping itself in his mind. Before Heckraft came she had been eager to fly from the solitudes; it was since his arrival that she had learnt to find a quiet happiness among the hills.

"I remember," she said. "There was a time when

I was very restless, and longed for any change. I bothered you a lot then, I don't doubt."

"I liked being bothered in that way," he answered sulkily. "I'd like to see you as eager now to get out of this as you once were. . . . What's caused you to change?"

She smiled at him.

"Are you so sure that I have changed?"

"Well, the conditions of your life haven't altered," he answered, "yet you seem satisfied with them as they are."

"Oh! no." She shook her head. "I'm far from satisfied. You see, I am one of those people who are not easily satisfied, and who never remain satisfied for long. Besides, the conditions of my life here have altered in certain ways; I'm busier than I used to me, and I'm learning patience from the hills."

"Damn the hills!" he exclaimed irritably. "You've learnt that cult from Heckraft. He talked a lot of drivel about the hills at one time."

"He talks about the hills still, but not drivel," Alieta replied.

The car bumped over a stone, and skidded in the thick dust of the road; its driver swore. Alieta, with a steady hand upon her rein, looked on unmoved.

"You see a lot of one another, it seems," he said.

He watched her suspiciously while he spoke. Someone at the hotel had been opening his eyes in respect of much that happened in his absence. He knew more of her intimacy with Heckraft than Alieta had any idea of.

"We see very little of one another lately," she answered quietly. "Mr. Heckraft, also, is busier than formerly."

"Yes," he returned curtly. "I've heard of that too."

She looked him straight in the eyes.

"You are straining my patience very thin," she said. "I can make allowance for you up to a certain point, but be careful how you go too far. Mr. Heckraft is a friend of mine. As a friend, I value his acquaintance highly, and I cannot listen without anger to the base insinuations you are making. Can't you see, Harold, how poor an opinion you show yourself to hold of the woman you think to marry by these paltry doubts which you are not above harbouring?"

He reddened, and looked, she was pleased to see, somewhat ashamed as he answered:

"You know I don't hold a poor opinion of you. It's just because I'm so head over ears in love with you that I can't bear the thought of your looking kindly on another man. . . . I'm a fool. I know it. But you're stand-offish, Alieta, and you used not to be. I want to get married at once, and you seem no longer keen."

"Was I ever keen?" Alieta asked.— "To get married, I mean?"

"Well, you didn't imagine, I take it, that we'd go on being engaged indefinitely?"

"No; I didn't imagine that—at least, I think not. But—marriage!"

"It's got to be some time," he argued with a sullen defiance that made her feel suddenly sorry for him. He looked rather like a great boy at odds with life, and the maternal side of her nature took pity on him.

"Have you spoken to your father about—me?" she asked.

He reddened again, this time more deeply.

"No." He snapped the words at her. "My plan is to get married, and speak afterwards."

"That's not fair to him," she said quietly.

"Oh, damn him!" he returned.

"It's not fair to me," she continued, in the quiet, determined manner which he was seldom able to resist. He looked at her quickly.

"If he knew you, it would be different," he said.

"Then let me go and make his acquaintance."

"No. . . . afterwards."

She smiled faintly, and pulling off the glove from her left hand, drew off her engagement ring, and held it out to him.

"Go to him," she said, "and tell him of your engagement. Take this. When you have done what I say, you may bring it back to me."

He made no movement to take the ring, though she leaned sideways from her horse, proffering it between her fingers.

"There'll be the devil of a row," he said. "He'll not listen to reason. . . . He'll not give his consent."

"You will at least have done the right thing," she persisted,—"by him, and by me. . . . Take it. Until you do what I say, there is no engagement."

He looked at her with the ready suspicion of her, which once having found room in his mind it was not easy for him to get rid of, shining in his eyes.

"It's not just a way of backing out?" he demanded breathlessly.

For a moment Alieta looked passionately angry, the next, meeting his miserable, distrustful, absurdly boyish eyes, she smiled.

"It is not a way of backing out," she answered. "On the contrary it will seal the compact between us."

IX

DURING the next few days Alieta looked often at her left hand, denuded of its brilliant circlet, and there was a quiet satisfaction in her eyes. The absence of the outward sign of her engagement, and her satisfaction in this temporary freedom, set her wondering whether she was being quite fair to Harold Johnson and to herself in letting the engagement stand. And yet she saw no reason why it should terminate. She was conscious of no alteration in her regard for him, and she had felt no hesitation at the time when she accepted him. He was the same now as then. If there were any change it was in herself. She felt differently about things, without knowing why. She did not wish to marry. As once she had felt dissatisfaction with her life, she now felt dissatisfied at the thought of change.

Not for one moment did she consider Heckraft responsible for the alteration in her outlook. Despite Johnson's jealous hints, she neither considered herself in love with Heckraft, nor imagined him to be in love with her. But somehow her horizon had widened, and what had once occurred to her as pleasant no longer appealed in the same way. She concluded that she must be inconsistent and decided to correct this error before it became a confirmed fault. She was not justified in lightly accepting a man's love, and later, for no particular reason, rejecting it. When he brought her back his ring she would let him

replace it on her finger. He had said to her when he took it: "It will enable me to procure the second ring to go with it." And he had placed it in his breast pocket as an earnest of his intention, and so dismissed the subject.

But the task she had set him to perform was not an easy one. He knew the objections that would be raised, recognised too, with gloomy anger, that his father held the whip hand; he was no more independent, he was even less independent, than the least of his employees; for he stood to lose, not only a salary, but his expected inheritance. The only point which seemed to elude him in the whole business was that the attitude he allowed himself to assume in thus placing himself in so subservient a position was wholly undignified. A person who looks for every favour at the hands of another has no claim to the ordering of his life, and to have no claim in this respect is humiliating to the individual.

Young Johnson approached his father on the subject of his engagement after dinner on the evening of his return from Drummond. Alieta's ring seemed to burn a hole in his pocket, and the memory of her, as he had seen her that morning, with Heckraft standing at her stirrup with her hand in his, the significance of their attitude, magnified and distorted in a mind, predisposed by the tales he had heard of the intimacy between them to see evil where none existed, so inflamed his jealousy, which being hitherto an unknown emotion with him was all the less endurable, that he could not refrain from venting his spite on the man by seeking to prejudice him in his father's opinion. He spoke of the farm which Heckraft and Gommet had purchased, and tried with ill success to point out that this venture would be prejudicial to their own interests.

"In what way?" asked Johnson, senior. "I confess I can't see why they shouldn't buy a farm, and since they can't possibly work it for the next five years at least, it appears to me to call for no immediate concern."

"They are not going to study your interests," his son persisted, "when they have a separate interest in their own farm; they'll neglect your affairs in the business of looking after their own. That's human nature."

"You seem to have a fairly low conception of human nature," the older man remarked.

Young Johnson snipped the end off a cigar, and lighted it ill-temperedly.

"I don't like Heckraft," he said. "I don't trust him. This opposition scheme is his idea."

"Nonsense! I've heard Gommet speak of it a dozen times. Besides, the land's there, and pretty well only fitted for wattles. If they didn't plant it, someone else would. If I'd wanted to I could have bought up that farm two years ago."

"Why didn't you?"

"Oh! wattle bark is not a great money making concern. I can invest my capital to greater advantage."

"You'd do better with wattles if you didn't employ incompetent people," his son asserted. "Gommet is all right, but that fellow, Heckraft, knows nothing about the business. He's simply learning at your expense with a view to gaining knowledge to turn to his own account."

"He's a wise man," returned Johnson, senior, imperturbably, "to profit by his experiences. So long as he doesn't neglect his present job, I see no reason to object."

"It's all very fine to talk in that strain, but how can you tell he isn't neglecting his job? I'd get rid of him

before he turns round and tells you he's had enough of working for you."

"Heckraft being a gentleman will leave my employ like a gentleman," the other answered with the obstinacy characteristic of him, an obstinacy which his son inherited in a marked degree, though the son's obstinacy showed usually in a more unfavourable light, being influenced by a less matured and well-regulated judgment.

"Besides," added Mr. Johnson, after a slight pause, "Heckraft's position with me is different from that of the general run of managers. I employed him to oblige Sir George Rath, and I have no intention of annoying my old friend by dismissing a protégé of his for no sufficient reason."

"Oh, well!" exclaimed young Johnson irritably, dropping his cigar-ash into an empty wineglass, "if you're going to work on those quixotic lines you must be prepared to lose. I've given you the tip, that's all that concerns me. You know now what's going on."

The older man looked hard at the younger as he sat back in his chair and smoked deliberately. His son's suddenly kindled interest in the Drummond wattle estate piqued his curiosity.

"I know something of what is going on," he answered, but without pointing the significance of the remark which was lost upon his hearer. "But the information doesn't amount to much. I had no idea, by the way, that you purposed going to Drummond to-day."

The young man reddened, and fidgeted with the stem of a wineglass. He felt the keen eyes opposite boring into him, and for the life of him he could not at the moment have raised his own to meet them. He was conscious of something in his father's manner that

hinted at—was it knowledge, or merely a suspicion of what it lay in his mind to tell him? Instinctively his hand went furtively to his breast-pocket where Alieta's ring lay, the pledge of his promise to her, the seal of a mutual compact, and then as furtively strayed back again to the glass, which he toyed with as before, twisting it round so that the wine dregs caught the ash he had dropped into it, slowly dissolving it. He appeared to watch the action of the wine on the white ash with the concentration of a man observing a scientific experiment; in reality his mind was detached altogether from his occupation, and was not even consciously aware of the component parts in the glass he was nervously handling.

"I often run up—when I'm in town," he jerked out as the finish of a lengthy pause.

"Yes!"

The syllable did not help him much, but he was braced now to the disclosure, and he plunged headlong into the business as though his present haste would make up for his former reluctance.

"There's someone there I'm very interested in. I go to see—Her."

"Oh, indeed! Who is—Her?"

Young Johnson saw fit to ignore the sarcasm of the tone in which the question was asked, and replied with steadily growing composure.

"You know Jacobus Van der Vyver? He's the biggest landowner in the district. . . . She is his daughter."

A longer pause followed upon this speech. Neither man smoked now. The younger had put aside his cigar when he started upon the subject; the older man's was gripped between his fingers, and the hand lay motionless on the table beside his untouched glass of whisky and soda. Here at last was this thing

which had threatened, hitting him in his most vulnerable spot—the seat of his social ambitions. He had planned a marriage for his son with Sir George Rath's daughter, a girl remarkable for neither beauty nor brilliance of wit, but with the weight of a great influence in her father's position sufficient to render the possession of either quality unnecessary in Johnson senior's opinion. But the two Johnsons did not see things from the same point of view.

"A Boer farmer's girl, eh?" he said with a sneer. "I trust that, while amusing yourself in such company, you will be careful to avoid an entanglement."

The young man looked up quickly. His eyes were hostile, the full red lips under the fair moustache twitched with nervous indignation. What he could not stand, even from his father, was to hear Alieta referred to in this insulting manner.

"You either wilfully misapprehend my meaning or are grossly mistaken," he exclaimed with a fierceness that caused his listener to raise his brows in a show of faint surprise. "I am not amusing myself. I am engaged to marry Alieta Van der Vyver."

Johnson senior leaned across the table, and looked hard into the flushed, angry face of his son. His own anger was of the cold, contained order, more deadly and unrelenting than any violence of passionate wrath, and when he spoke it was in the measured tones of a man who delivers his ultimatum.

"I cannot countenance such an engagement," he said with curt decisiveness. "I do not wish to hear anything further on the subject. I shall treat it as though I had not heard it. So long as I hear nothing further of this, things will remain as they have been between us; but if you seek to bring an unwelcome daughter-in-law home to me, you will find the doors of this house closed to you, and you will have to

provide for your wife without any assistance, or hope of future benefits from me. I have said all I intend to say on the subject, and I will listen to nothing you have to urge in defence of your choice. You've got to give up one of two things, this girl or your position as my son. You cannot maintain both. I will never countenance a marriage between my son and any Dutchwoman."

Harold Johnson rose to his feet, pushing his chair back with a violence that upset it, and remaining with his hand clenched upon the table, oblivious of the accident.

"I think you're damnably unfair," he stuttered,—"damnably."

With which he swung round on his heel and strode in sullen haste towards the door.

"Damnably unfair," he repeated savagely, his hand on the doorknob,—"and unreasonable."

Then he went out and jerked the door to behind him.

As he passed the drawing-room he hesitated, took a step towards the half-open door, then, changing his mind, went on to the staircase. With his hand on the newel he paused again, and, again changing his mind, turned about and strode resolutely back. He pushed the drawing-room door wider and entered. His mother was there alone, seated beside a small table on which a reading lamp stood, poring over fashion books. She was an artificial-looking woman, with dyed hair and a carefully made up complexion. In her youth she had been handsome, and she still strove at the age of fifty to retain the only asset of any importance she had ever possessed. She also posed as a "nice" woman. Her idea of niceness—it was also her husband's, or had been at the time he married her—was to be entirely feminine, and her idea of

femininity was a gracious softness of manner and an ignorance of evil, the result of a carefully guarded ease, sheltered from everything that was unpleasant and provided with everything that conduced to bodily ease and luxury. Her finest quality was her affection for her son. It was his tribute to, and realisation of, this quality which made him seek her now; as his former hesitation, and still half-reluctant approach, was the result of his complete comprehension of those other qualities of hers which instinctively told him that in this, the most important crisis of his life, she would not understand and would fail him utterly.

She looked up from her paper when he halted in front of her, and surveyed his thwarted, boyish face with large, short-sighted, blue eyes, eyes which once had been extraordinarily like his own, which even yet were beautiful, though their owner was doing her utmost to ruin them because her vanity would not permit her to wear glasses.

"You've been long enough talking business," she said. "I began to wonder what kept you. What was it all about?"

She asked without curiosity. She never wanted to hear about business. She had only a vague idea of what her husband's business was. Business was an abstract term that signified masculine interests; it only affected her in as far as it brought in a handsome income.

"We had a row," he answered.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed mildly, but expressed no surprise. Rows were masculine too. When men got together one must expect them; but one need not let them intrude into the drawing-room. "Couldn't you have got it over quicker?" she asked.

"Look here, mother," he said, and he drew up a chair and sat down beside her. "I know you don't

like that sort of thing, but you've got to be drawn into this. I want you to intercede for me."

"I couldn't have a row with your father," she said, surprised, and obviously perturbed. "He'd get the best of it, and it would only give me a headache. Besides, it isn't nice."

In spite of discouragement young Johnson stuck grimly to his point.

"I don't want you to have a row,—of course not. You've got to be a go-between, and patch this matter up somehow."

"What is it?" she asked.—"Money?"

She was sure this must be the cause of the trouble, because, though her own allowance was handsome enough to have kept a large family in comfort, she invariably exceeded it.

"If you're short, Harold, and it's really pressing, I'll wait for my emerald necklace a month or two and let you have what I can. . . . And I could do with a few less frocks, perhaps."

She gazed at the pile of fashion books wistfully. It was a boast of hers, and had become a recognised fact among her set, that she never appeared twice in public in the same dress. This was the greatest sacrifice her shallow soul could conceive, and it was a proof of the depth of her affection for him that she made the proposal. But he swept it aside, impatient and unappreciative.

"Money!" he repeated with a coarse indifference to the fastidious ears listening to him in shocked distress. "Damn money! It's the rotten money that gives him the upper hand. . . . I want to marry, and I want to marry now."

"Why not?" she asked, so immeasurably relieved that she was not called upon to make any sacrifices that the usual maternal jealousy provoked by such

disclosures failed to touch her. Already she was busy with a mental picture of a fashionable wedding, with herself, as mother of the bridegroom, sumptuously gowned, and long columns in the papers, and portraits of the wedding party in the leading journals.

He broke in ruthlessly on her pleasant reverie.

"Because if I do," he said, "it means the stopping of my allowance,—the cutting me off without a shilling. . . . He won't hear of it."

"But I've heard him say," she argued,—"he's spoken of it with Sir George,—that as soon as you think of settling down he'll build you a house. . . . And Sir George wants you to go in for politics."

"What the devil has my career to do with Sir George Rath?" he demanded.

"But, of course," his mother said, raising surprised eyes to his angry face, "you are going to marry Muriel Rath?"

"Damn Muriel Rath!" he ejaculated, and his tone was increasingly bitter. "So that's his reason for objecting to my making my choice without consulting him? . . . Since it is my concern, and nobody's else,—since I'm going to live with her, I intend to select my own wife; and I'm going to marry for love, and for no other reason."

Mrs. Johnson listened to his outburst in perplexed silence. She wrinkled her brow, and then, recollecting that this would bring lines, smoothed it out again and pressed her hand to her forehead.

"Of course," she said. "But why shouldn't you love Muriel? She is quite a nice girl,—so feminine, and so yielding. And her father's influence is tremendous."

The young man lost his temper; it was of the qual-

ity which easily gets mislaid. He bounced out of his seat.

"I'm sick of the sound of that name," he shouted. "Sir George Rath appears to be a sort of God Almighty in this house. And as for his puling, giggling daughter, she's a fool. I wouldn't marry her if she were the only woman in Africa."

"Don't be violent, Harold," Mrs. Johnson interposed hastily, in the manner of an elder correcting an impetuous child. "And Muriel Rath is not in Africa. She is in England at present. I heard from her last mail."

"I hope she'll have the sense to remain in England," he retorted rudely.

He went behind her chair, and laid a persuasive hand upon her shoulder.

"I want you to put the thought of Muriel as a possible wife for me out of your head," he said earnestly, and with a certain dignity that made its own appeal. "I've made my choice; and I'm going to marry the girl I love, or I won't marry at all. That's final."

"But, my dear boy," she cried, looking up at him, "who is the girl? Is it anyone I know?"

"No," he answered. "It is Alieta Van der Vyver. Her people are big farmers near Inchanga."

"Harold!"

She fairly gasped. Her painted, calculating face hardened. Gone were the visions of a fashionable wedding, dispersed like a dream at the dreamer's awakening. All her ambitions for her son's future faded into nothingness before this cold-blooded avowal of a preference for a Dutch girl over a woman of his own class and race.

"Harold!" she repeated in a fainter tone. "You are jesting. You can't be serious. Why, it would be social suicide to do what you propose."

"Rot!" he ejaculated. "The Van der Vyvers' blood is better than our own. They're descendants of the oldest settlers."

"Blood!" she echoed in a tone of disgust. "What does blood count for in a country like this? If your Van der Vyver had the blue blood of all the Hollanders in his veins he'd still be an unimportant old Boer. And with your father's wealth, you might marry anyone!"

"As far as wealth goes," he sneered, "I daresay old Van der Vyver has as much as the governor. And as far as brains and beauty and personality go, his daughter is a queen to Muriel Rath. . . . But I suppose I am only wasting my breath. . . . You're like the governor. You've made a fetich of ambition, so that you can't see that it's more decent for a man to marry for love than to take a wife as a sort of social stepladder. I'm not going in for that kind of marriage. And I refuse to be made a cat's-paw of any longer."

He left her, and went out of the room, and out of the house, cursing his circumstances, the Raths, particularly Sir George Rath, baronet, and his own parents, whole-heartedly. But it did not occur to him to attempt to alter his circumstances and break away finally from his position as pensioner on his father's bounty. He was sufficiently his mother's son to appreciate the pleasant places and the easiest paths of life.

X

JOHNSON went with his tale of failure to Alieta as soon as he could conveniently get away. He had done what she had bidden him do, and the result was even as he had foretold. If Alieta should feel hurt at the affront to herself when he informed her of his non-success, she would be in a sense prepared for it. He had never held out any hope that his father would sanction their marriage; although he had not known before of his father's private ambitions, he had always been aware of his peculiarly narrow racial prejudices. He had been a most bitter and bigoted opponent of closer union. He was one of those men who, too selfish to look ahead in a patriotic sense, see the present only in as far as it affects their own interests. The power of the Dutch in the Colony, a power which has its origin in the Dutchman's love of the country of his adoption, was a constant exasperation to him. South Africa since the Union, as he was fond of proclaiming, was no place for Englishmen. But he continued to reside in the country, which furnished him with a handsome income, and a social status he would not have enjoyed elsewhere. It was the culminating bitterness in the cup when his only son proposed to take a wife from among the people he hated.

Young Johnson motored up to Inchanga early one morning. Alieta was in the kitchen when he arrived, taking the fresh cream from the separator to add to

that already ripening for the churn. He sought her there and stood beside her while she worked. She wore a blue overall over her dress, with the sleeves rolled up above her elbows, and she looked cool, and business-like, and—he noticed it—wonderfully indifferent. Beyond the bright smile she gave him when he kissed her, she displayed no particular emotion at sight of him, and gave no sign of anxiety or curiosity to learn the result of his mission. He decided that she probably took it for granted that all was well. But in this he was mistaken. Alieta judged at once from his gloomy face that he had not succeeded. But since he did not appear in any hurry to open the subject, she finished what she was doing, and then taking off her overall, led the way out to the stoep, and made him sit down beside her. When they were seated she held out her left hand.

"Have you brought back my ring?" she said.

He caught her hand and gripped it hard.

"I brought back the ring," he answered hoarsely. "And I did what you told me to, but—it was useless, Alieta."

"Poor boy!" she said softly.

She scrutinised him closely, with her head tilted back, as he slipped her engagement ring on to its finger. She perfectly understood that he had come to her for sympathy; and she did sympathise with him, but rather as a woman sympathises with a disappointed child, than as one human being sharing trouble with another.

"What is to be done now?" she asked. "We are rather where we were before."

"He threatens to cut me off," he said, and scowled at the recollection of his interview with his father. "There's a girl, you see, he would like me to marry; and he's mad at this."

Alieta thought for a while.

"Why not let him cut you off?" she said, as an outcome of her reflection.

He stared at her.

"Do you suppose we can live on air?" he demanded, a mixture of scorn and derision in his voice at the impracticability of the question.

Alieta laughed.

"Of course not. I've a very healthy appetite, and I like comfortable surroundings. But you could work, I imagine. . . . You work for your father now. . . . Why not work for someone else?"

"You are talking nonsense," he exclaimed irritably. "Working, as you call it, for my father is a very different matter from working for another man. I potter round now, and am my own master; my time is practically my own. . . . I very much doubt that I could work for anyone else. I've had no business training."

"I see." Alieta frowned. It was in her mind to say, "So you don't think our love worth the making of the effort?" But she checked the impulse. "Then I suppose it only remains for me to release you from your engagement?"

He turned on her with a passion that surprised her. She had made her offer in perfect sincerity. She had done what occurred to her the only thing to be done in the circumstances,—offered to free him from an obligation there appeared no possibility of his being able to fulfil, and he resented it as he might have had she been responsible for the raising of the barriers to their union.

"I believe that's what you want," he cried,—"to chuck me. . . . I've thought that once or twice lately. But I'm not going to be a consenting party. I can't force you to marry me against your will, but

I'll not release you voluntarily, Alieta. . . . Anyway, I think the suggestion is very ill-timed when a man is down on his luck."

"And I think your anger very foolish," Alieta returned with dignity. "Perhaps when you are calmer you will explain what you intend to do, since you won't defy your father openly by marrying me without his consent, and you won't accept the freedom I felt it right to offer you. We can't go on being engaged indefinitely, you know, until we both grow old. That would be fair on neither."

Nor did Alieta recall in thus arguing that until quite recently the indefiniteness of the engagement was what had appealed to her as so entirely satisfactory.

"I've thought of that," he said, and paused, regarding her with a lingering suspicion in his blue eyes. He did not feel sure of her, and he had an idea that she would take amiss the proposal he was about to make. He still retained her hand. He held it gripped in one of his; with the other he caught her wrist and drew her closer to him.

"I want you to marry me secretly," he muttered.

She started and pulled her hand sharply away.

"I couldn't," she said. She got up and went to the rail of the stoep and stood there, looking unseeingly out across the garden. "I couldn't do that," she repeated, with a blunt determination that warned him not to press her farther and so court a more decided failure. "You mustn't ask me. . . . That sort of thing. . . . It——"

She broke off abruptly in her speech and faced round slowly.

"If we did that," she said, "and your father ever discovered the truth, it would mean the end of all chance of happiness for you and for me."

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"There is no reason why he should discover it," he argued.

Alieta regarded him gravely.

"It isn't right," she said. "There is a better way than that. . . . Go and work for me. When you earn just enough to keep us, I will come to you."

He evaded this, and worked round to another point.

"After all," he said, without looking at her, examining the toe of his boot minutely, aware that her eyes were on him while he spoke, "your people are wealthy. If the worst comes to the worst, and I have a split with my governor, your father could help us along a bit. . . . Why not?"

Alieta surveyed him coldly.

"My father would never agree to a secret marriage," she said. "And he has too great a respect for labour to keep me and a husband who could not provide for me by his own exertions."

He looked up sharply.

"You don't help a fellow," he exclaimed angrily. . . . "You won't do your share."

"It is you who refuse to do your share," she answered. "If your love is worth anything at all, surely it is worth a little self-denial? . . . Why should you wish to be supported by others?—you, who have health, and strength, and intelligence. I would rather live with you in two rooms which you paid for by your own labour than in a mansion provided for us by your father. So long as you are dependent on the bounty of another you are under a continual obligation."

"I earn what I get from my father," he returned sullenly.

"You don't earn it. By your own admission you merely put in your time and amuse yourself."

"Well, hang it all! a man has more right to his father's money than anyone else."

"A man has only the *right* to what he earns," she retorted.

She returned to her chair, and, sitting down, slipped her hand in his. His aggrieved and keenly disappointed expression touched her.

"My poor boy!" she said softly. "It is hard on you. . . . Your training is all against you. Don't look so worried, Harold. You'll win, if you only make up your mind to try."

"But you won't wait," he protested. "It might be years. . . ."

"If I knew you were working for me, I would wait," she answered quietly.

He looked at her gloomily.

"You are the most obstinate woman I ever knew," he said shortly. "Besides, I can't wait years. I've not got that degree of patience. I want you now. . . . And I can't see why the devil we shouldn't marry. . . . You are unreasonable, Alieta."

Alieta laughed.

"There is the bell for breakfast," she exclaimed, rising. "When you have broken your fast you'll feel better." She smoothed the hair back from his forehead and kissed him. "You have got to grow up some time," she said. "I want to see you learn to walk alone."

It did not help to soothe Johnson's ruffled temper when he sat down to breakfast in the eet-kamer with his prospective father-in-law in courduroy trousers and veldschoens, just as he came from the lands where he worked as hard as any of his servants, and his prospective mother-in-law in a big white apron,

which she did not remove since she would need it again as soon as the meal was finished. He had taken these trifles once as a matter of course; this morning, with the memory of his father's recent sneers and his mother's undisguised dismay at his contemplated union inflaming his mind, he found himself drawing comparisons between this home, which was all his future wife had ever known, and the elegant surroundings he was accustomed to. It occurred to him as preposterous that wealthy people should live in such humble style. In his opinion it betrayed a want of self-respect. His irritation was possibly aggravated by the reflection that to such people as these, who were not ashamed to work, but rather looked with scorn upon the idlers, a man who shied at the thought of earning his own bread would be incomprehensible. They would have no time for him.

He shook hands with the old people, and sat down gloomily opposite Alieta. The old baas asked a blessing on the food, and his wife then ladled out the mealie porridge which the Hottentot maid set before her on the snowy cloth.

"I kept the breakfast back ten minutes to give you time for a praatje," she said to Johnson, and looked from his glum face to Alieta's serenely unconcerned countenance with shrewd, understanding eyes. Perhaps she had made a mistake. Punctuality was a good rule; if she had not broken it to allow of that little talk she might have averted a quarrel.

Alieta smiled at her mother.

"If you had delayed it another five minutes, we should have come to blows," she said.

Johnson, who suffered from a weakness, shared by many fair people, of readily changing colour, flushed slightly. He both understood and spoke Dutch flu-

ently, which was one of the reasons why the Van der Vyvers approved of him.

"The blows would have come all from one side," he said. "I'm not sure there weren't a few; I'm feeling bruised."

"Do I hit so hard, poor boy?" Alieta asked softly, a faint smile lurking in the depths of her eyes. She pushed the cream jug across the table to him, knowing his partiality. "Make the most of your opportunities," she added. "When we are married I shall forbid cream."

Van der Vyver glanced down the table at the young man, and his heavy grey moustache twitched humourously.

"In the courting days a man feels he is born to rule," he observed; "when he is married he knows he isn't."

"Ach! some of you never know it," Mrs. Van der Vyver returned; "it is we women who know."

"Are you not afraid?" Alieta asked the young man. He laughed at her.

"I give my mare her head," he said, "but I control the rein."

Alieta did not appear to resent the analogy, whatever she thought, but her mother surveyed the speaker with an expression not easy to read.

"You are one of those who will never know," she said drily. "When you think you are controlling your mare, she is doubtless picking her own way."

"Have a chop?" suggested Van der Vyver sympathetically, serving from a huge pile of mutton chops, brown and frizzling on the dish before him. "Much good meat makes a man strong to face his difficulties. The path of life is simple only to the solitary wayfarer; when a man takes a partner it becomes immediately complicated. The mind of a woman

once arrived at a decision is like the prickly pear hedge; one may, by patient labour and perseverance, cut a way through, but there is no possibility of forcing a passage. . . . The Book teaches that it is not good for man to live alone,—but it is less difficult. That is so."

The old man's eyes twinkled as he looked at the listening, scornful countenance of the woman who had ruled his home and himself for over thirty years, and who, to quote popular opinion, had ever proved the better man when it came to a conflict of wills; then he handed the plate with two frizzling chops on it to Johnson.

"Many a man weds what he believes to be pliable because it is soft, feminine flesh; but appearances are deceptive. It is the sour-faced women that are the easiest to lead. As the saying is,—*Still water, diepe gronde onder, draai de duivel rond.*"

Which, being literally translated, reads,—"Still water, deep ground under, turn the devil round."

XI

NO seed is ever sown without being productive of its result. If Harold Johnson had not actually prejudiced his father against Heckraft, he had set his thoughts working round the problem of a double interest until he began to feel that there had been disloyalty towards himself, and a certain ingratitude in his manager's haste to set up an opposing interest.

As an outcome of this, Heckraft received a summons to wait upon his employer in Durban. It was not alone the fact that Heckraft sought to work in opposition—Johnson senior was fair minded enough to see that it was Heckraft or another—that actuated him in insisting on a personal interview with his manager; his son's disquieting confidence weighed yet more heavily with him in commanding the interview, at which he hoped to learn more than he could expect to from the latter, whom he would not allow himself to question.

Heckraft, surprised on receiving the letter, passed it across the breakfast-table to Gommet. Gommet read it and returned it with a grunt.

"Just as I said," he commented. "They want to get rid of you."

"But why?" Heckraft asked.

"Jealousy."

"Oh, rot! Johnson knows that our interest can never clash with his."

Gommet busied himself with spreading butter thickly on his bread, and smiled covertly.

"I'll let you into the know," he said, after a pause; "it's time. . . . You are cutting the puppy out."

Heckraft's face flamed.

"Damn it all!' he exclaimed indignantly. "Can't a man be decent to a woman without being under suspicion of courting her? I have an immense respect for Miss Van der Vyver."

"So have I," the engineer returned equably. "Which is one of the reasons why I am glad to see that she appreciates your 'decency.' "

"Do you mean to insinuate that I'm flirting with her?" Anthony Heckraft demanded with heat.

Gommet's smile deepened.

"No," he replied calmly. "Flirting is attention without intention. I should say you were quite serious—and so is she."

"Then you think——" Heckraft rose from his seat, and stood with one hand on the back of his chair, staring blankly at his companion—"you think that I'm deliberately making love to a girl whose affections are already engaged? That's as good as calling me a damned scoundrel."

Gommet raised his eyes and regarded the speaker unconcernedly.

"You mistake me," he replied coolly. "I think that you are unconsciously making a girl love you whose affections have never been touched before. . . . She's engaged to Harold Johnson, and she cares for you. A child could see that—that's why the puppy has discovered it. I don't know how old Johnson will feel in the matter, but I fancy he'll be obliged to you."

Heckraft had occasion to remember Gommet's talk when later he journeyed down to Durban in obedi-

ence to orders, and met his employer face to face. The ostensible reason for the interview was the purchase of Nooitgedacht, and how the conflicting interest would affect their relations; but it was manifest from the outset that that was not why Johnson, senior, had sent for him; plainly, his greatest concern was his son's liaison, as he was pleased to term it, with Alieta Van der Vyver. He had made outside inquiries, and had elicited from the same source that had poisoned Harold Johnson's mind and inflamed his jealousy against Heckraft, that the new manager at Drummond was opposing his son's interest, as well as his own. The latter piece of information was far from displeasing to him, but, in view of his son's wealth, he did not seriously regard Heckraft as a formidable rival for the Dutch girl's favour. When it came to a choice between two men, his own mean experience had taught him that mercenary advantages weighed in the balance heavily against less worldly attractions.

He sounded Heckraft in regard to his son's partiality, and finding the latter uncommunicative, became brutally frank in the matter of his unalterable objection to the ill-assorted union.

"I have no personal objection to the lady," he wound up diplomatically, in consideration of his listener's supposed admiration. "I have no knowledge of her; but I have other plans for my son. If he chooses to make a fool of himself, I can't prevent it, but I can and will disinherit him."

Heckraft listened in polite silence.

"It is scarcely my affair," he said at the finish. "Neither Mr. Johnson nor Miss Van der Vyver have confided in me."

"Quite so. Yet I believe I am not mistaken in

supposing you to be on very friendly terms with Miss Van der Vyver?"

Heckraft changed colour.

"I esteem it a privilege to call myself her friend," he replied stiffly.

Mr. Johnson looked immeasurably relieved.

"She is fortunate," he returned courteously, and added with a quick change of subject and manner: "Well, I am glad to have had this talk with you, Heckraft. I quite understand that my interests will not suffer on account of your venture. I am obliged to you for being so frank with me. If I can be of assistance to you in any way in the near future, I shall be glad. I would not wish to stand in the light of your getting on. It is gratifying to know that you like Drummond sufficiently to wish to settle there."

"Now, what the devil!" said Heckraft to himself, when he stood in the sunny street outside Johnson's office, "did he mean?"

And, as if in answer to his puzzled reflection, Gommet's belief, expressed at the breakfast-table, that it would be agreeable to the older Johnson that he should cut out the son in Miss Van der Vyver's regard flashed into his mind. Mr. Johnson had in a roundabout way endeavoured to convey to him that such a course would not meet with his disfavour, but might gain for him future substantial advantages. The interview had amounted to a subtle bribe to enter into competition with Harold Johnson for the hand of Alieta Van der Vyver.

Heckraft lunched at a hotel, and spent some hours seeing the town, which he had regretted not being able to do on the day of his arrival. He learnt that the *Ariadne* was in dock, and took the tram down to the wharf and went aboard her.

The captain was ashore, but Walford did the honours with an air of beatitude that seemed to call for other explanation than pleasure at the sight of a former passenger. The explanation came later over the whisky in the cabin, in which he insisted on Heckraft joining him. He had, Heckraft learnt, found Mollie Heathcote, and he drank her health, as he had done frequently since the discovery, with cheerful complacency, and an air of quiet self-gratulation.

"I made inquiries," he confided to his sympathetic listener, a smile in his blue eyes, "after I got home that trip. What Johnny said, that time I was yarning about her, made me anxious to find things out. She was settled down in Gravesend, and I got the address and went to see her."

He chuckled, and gazed into his half empty glass with a reminiscent smile.

"It was quite true what Johnny said; she never got my note, and the fainting was a put-up job. She'd an idea she'd pay me out for scaring her,—wanted to bring me to my knees, and I spoilt her game by keeping out of her way." He chuckled again. "We had a good laugh over that," he said. "But it wasn't much of a laughing matter with either of us at the time."

"Well, all's well that ends well," was Heckraft's original comment, as he met the steady gaze of the man whose "nerves" appeared to have undergone some miraculous cure. "When is it to be, old fellow?"

Walford laughed aloud without a trace of bitterness.

"She's married," he answered cheerfully,—"and got five kids. . . . Jolly little kids they are. But her temper's developed, like her father's. . . . And she's fat. . . . Eight years make a difference. . . .

Funny old world, eh? . . . The man's a fool who kicks against destiny; it's as often as not a let off when fate appears to have played you a dirty trick."

Which sentiment recalled to Heckraft's memory the once familiar, now half-forgotten lines: "Peu polie, pas jolie, tel était Madame Angot." In eight years a woman may grow old, and a man philosophical. The attraction of the flesh is short-lived.

"Here's to single blessedness!" cried the chief, and raising his glass, he drained the contents, and set it down again empty. "Don't you get spliced, Heckraft. . . . You'll be a blithering ass, if you do. A man's only a little god to a woman until he belongs to her."

"And yet the man's incomplete without the woman," Heckraft answered, and added musingly: "It must be good to come home to a welcome at the finish of the day."

"That's just it," Walford said, puffing at his pipe with lazy enjoyment. "There isn't any welcome after the honeymoon. I've not been married, but I know plenty of chaps who are; and I've heard many a man admit that, sitting opposite to his wife of an evening, and wishing himself elsewhere, he has asked himself the question: 'I wonder what the devil made me marry that?' "

"One man's experience is not another's," Heckraft replied dryly.

His listener glanced across at him with a flicker of his heavy lids.

"That's tantamount to an acknowledgment that you're in love," he said. "Well, I'm dashed sorry to hear it. The kindest thing I can wish you is that Providence will step in, as it did with me, and save you making a fool of yourself."

Heckraft found plenty of food for speculation on

his journey back to Drummond. One man had insinuatingly put the thought of marriage into his mind, and two men had told him bluntly that he was in love.

The latter statement he accepted; he knew it for an incontrovertible fact, had known it for some time, though he had not allowed himself to put it into words before, had persistently refused to dwell on it in his thoughts. Now, to the lowering of his self-esteem, he found himself not only dwelling on the idea, but seriously considering the ambiguous suggestions thrown out by his employer in their recent talk. Why should he not enter the field and fight openly for the woman he loved? If there were any grounds for Gommet's stated belief that she cared for him, he had a greater right to her than Harold Johnson.

Alone with Gommet in the evening, he told him just as much of the interview as he deemed advisable, keeping back everything in connection with Harold Johnson; a sudden accession of self-consciousness made the mere mention of the man's name displeasing to him, so that it was a relief that Gommet in discussing him invariably referred to him as the puppy.

"I told you," Gommet said, when he had heard the gist of the interview, "that it was a bit of spite on the puppy's part. He's been stirring up his governor against you. You'd better keep your eyes wide; he'll serve you any dirty trick that opportunity offers. I know the breed. Well, I'm glad, anyway, that you made the position clear to the baas. We're working in the open now."

He filled his pipe, and getting out the whisky bottle, settled himself in his chair near the open window.

"Fetch the fiddle, Tony," he said. "I'm like Saul.

Talking of that beast rouses the devil in me. . . . My soul needs soothing."

Heckraft got out his violin, and while Gommet sat and listened and drank whisky, he filled the silence with sweet sounds. The scent of the wattles stole in from outside, and in the house of the station master a solitary light gleamed suddenly in the dusk. Above the hills the big fog moon, red, like a newly risen sun, shone dully upon the scene.

XII

IN soothing the soul of Gommet, Heckraft succeeded unwittingly in stirring another soul into a tumult of unrest,—the soul of Alieta Van der Vyver.

Alieta was driving back from the station, when the sound of the violin flooding the evening stillness arrested her attention. She had been away from home for a few days, and was returning in the buggy with Banini, the small Indian who had driven over to meet the train. As she drove past Gommet's house, hearing the strains of music, she stopped surprised. She had no knowledge of Heckraft's gift. He had never played to her, nor spoken to her about music.

Alieta passed the reins to Banini, and sat back in her seat and listened. Heckraft was playing an Arab dance; and the barbaric music accorded well with the barbaric land, with the hot still night, with the pungent scent of the wattles, the dull gleam of the fog-rimmed moon, with the dark mystery of the hills, and the stirring of revolt and elemental passions that swayed Alieta's awakening senses. She sat in an ecstasy of enjoyment, and drank in the sounds.

It did not occur to her that she could be seen from the open window. Inside the room it was dark, save for the pale illumination of the moon, which fell wanly across the face of the player, showing it mask-like in the dimness as he bent over his instrument. Gommet, sitting well back in the shadow, watched the scene with curiosity. From where he sat Heck-

raft could command a view of the road, and Gommet was perfectly aware that he was conscious of Alieta's presence, that he had heard her drive past, had seen her sudden halt, and now was observing her intently while he drew the bow across the strings. The very quality of his music had changed with her appearance; he was playing to Alieta, to her only, though he was to all outward seeming oblivious of his audience.

Gommet sat rigid. In his heart he was calling the man a fool in that he did not lay aside his instrument and go forth and meet the girl.

And then, unexpectedly, the girl took the initiative. She stepped from the buggy, and, walking back along the road, stood right in front of the window.

Gommet turned his head towards Heckraft with a jerk of impatience; then he rose softly and stole out of the room. The music ceased abruptly. It broke, as it were, with a wail in the middle of a bar, and, putting the instrument down, Heckraft stepped through the window and joined Alieta in the shadowed road. His greeting was commonplace.

"How do you do, Miss Van der Vyver? It's a jolly night, isn't it?" he remarked.

Alieta gave him her hand, and ignored his speech.

"Oh! I never knew you could play like that," she breathed.

He laughed, a trifle self-consciously. She was adding to the tension which he had hoped to lessen with his bald little commonplace.

"It's my only parlour trick," he answered lightly.

"But you never told me," she said, and there was reproach in her tones. "You never play to me."

"I didn't know you'd care," he said.

She looked at him curiously, and disconcerted him with the hurt reflection:

"I wonder if you mean just that?"

"It's probably my selfishness," he returned evasively. "I like best to talk when I'm with you. The violin fills the blanks when Gommet and I find nothing to say to one another."

"You make me envious of Mr. Gommet," Alieta said quietly. "I am going to exact a promise. . . . You must come to Odsani sometimes, and bring the violin. . . . Will you?"

"I shall be very pleased," he answered.

Alieta moved a step nearer. Her eyes held his. By the light of the moon he saw, for all her composure, the struggle she was making for control, and the repressed excitement underlying her wonderful outward calm.

"You never come to Odsani now," she said. "Are your hours so very full that you have none to spare your friends?"

"Well, I've been fairly busy," he replied briefly, not wishing to hurt her, but fearful of meeting her at the moment on emotional ground. She was allowing the cloak of her reserve to fall from her, and he realised that, if he followed her example, if he loosened the rein of his passions, he would never stop until she was in possession of the secret which he could not determine to his satisfaction whether it would be for her good to know. He had got to think the thing out, to weigh all the chances; for the present he could see matters only from a strictly personal point of view,—could realise only his great necessity, —his heart-hunger; it blinded him, he knew, to other factors in the case, factors which yet had to be taken into consideration. His very eagerness to set aside in his thoughts another man's claim made him the more determined to refrain from precipitate action. If he trampled on his previous scruples, he would

do so after calm reflection, not in an exalted moment of emotional stress.

His answer affected Alieta more painfully than he suspected. She drew back within herself with a feeling of having been snubbed, little guessing that it was harder for the man, with his love self-confessed, to keep away from her than it was for her to miss seeing him, unconscious as yet that her restive desire for his company was based on a deeper feeling than friendly regard.

"I know," she said carelessly, moving away from him, and beginning to retrace her steps towards the waiting buggy. "You have a lot to attend to; and one doesn't feel inclined to be sociable after a hard day. I don't want to be selfish. I'll give your promise back, and take my chance of hearing you play later, when the slack season comes."

Heckraft walked beside her.

"Oh! there isn't such a press as all that," he returned. "I'm afraid I've been guilty of posing in giving you to imagine that I'm so terribly overworked. I'll bring the fiddle out one evening soon, if you don't think it will bore you."

Alieta made no response. She experienced no longer any pleasure in the prospect. He had spoilt things for her. His perfunctorily polite acceptance of her invitation had been prompted by no desire other than the wish to oblige her. She believed that he would not voluntarily have gone to Odsani, and regretted having exacted the half-hearted promise. But she had been carried away by his music, oddly stirred and disturbed; her senses had been rioting in a sweet excess, till brought back to the practical level of everyday life by Heckraft's quietly aloof manner.

She took her seat in the buggy, and Banini surrendered the reins. It occurred to Heckraft that her

escort was insufficient considering the loneliness of the road.

"Is that all they sent to meet you?" he asked, with a glance at the impassive countenance of Banini.

Alieta laughed softly at the disparagement in his tone.

"He's a very faithful attendant," she said.

But Heckraft was not satisfied.

"I envy you the drive," he remarked, looking ahead along the dimly lit road. "It's a perfect night. I wish you'd let me drive you. I should enjoy the walk home. . . . May I?"

"No." Alieta gave him her hand in farewell. "I quite appreciate your reason for suggesting it," she said with a touch of sarcasm which he failed to understand; "but there isn't the slightest need. And we should be uncomfortably crowded. Good night, Mr. Heckraft. I'm sorry I interrupted the concert."

She drove on without waiting for his response, and Heckraft, standing in the road and looking after her, was puzzled to account for her manner. He realised, without at all understanding the cause, that it had been actuated by a feeling of resentment towards himself.

He did not return to the house. Dissatisfied in mind alike with the result of the interview and the thought of the lonely drive which Alieta had refused to allow him to companion, he went to the stables, and, saddling his horse, followed the buggy at a distance to the gates of Odsani, and then rode back in the moonlight, a prey to conflicting thoughts, in which a doubt as to whether Alieta did in reality return his love became so insistent that it dwarfed every other consideration, filling the most prominent place in his mind. If Gommet were wrong in his surmise, if he himself had been mistaken, deluded by Gom-

met's confidence, and his own eagerness to read in her slightest kindness a response to his steadily growing regard, his future course was as simple as it was difficult to follow; he must leave Alieta undisturbed, and stifle his newly risen, and speedily disappointed, hopes as best he could. It was, after all, the more honourable course. To steal another man's prize was not playing the game. . . .

And yet he knew, as he pursued his way gloomily along the winding road between the wattles, that, had the prize been his for the taking, he would not have hesitated long.

XIII

DURING the weeks which followed his encounter with Alieta, Heckraft was tormented with a spirit of increasing unrest. He worked hard and late for the purpose of distracting his thoughts, and, not so much because Gommet occasionally spoke of Alieta, but rather on account of a fear he entertained that he might open the subject when they were together, he avoided Gommet's society. In the evenings, after work, he rode over to Nooitgedacht, and he spent his Sundays riding in the veld.

Gommet, who hitherto had passed his Sundays drinking whisky, now put in the day of rest on his newly acquired farm, to the benefit of his health and the saving of his pocket. He would have liked to have had his partner with him on these occasions, but, being under the impression that Heckraft was proceeding with his wooing, he maintained a discreet silence, and busied himself with plans for the erection of a couple of roomy mud and wattle huts, which he intended for his own occupation when Heckraft should bring home a mistress for the comfortable little bungalow at Nooitgedacht.

It was during one of his Sunday rides in search of distraction, when Gommet imagined him to be more profitably engaged, that Heckraft met with a very unpleasant adventure. He had lunched at Botha's Hill, and was returning in the afternoon at a leis-

urely pace across the veld, when a korhaan rose up screaming from the grass not a yard in front of his horse, flew for a short distance, uttering its shrill, harsh note at intervals, and alighted again, well within range had a man been carrying a gun. It is a peculiarity of this particular bird that it invariably gives the sportsman a clue to its hiding place, though it not infrequently spoils his aim by its sudden, discordant cry. The horse, thoroughly startled, shied violently, and bolted, getting completely out of hand. Aware of the pitfalls in the veld, but unable to avoid them, Heckraft trusted to the horse and his luck. It ended in the animal putting its foot in a meerkat's hole and coming down with its rider heavily. Heckraft struck his head in falling, and sustained a slight concussion. When he came to himself, and sat up, struggling to recall what had happened, the sun was sloping to the westward, and, save for himself, there was nothing living in sight. The horse had disappeared, and he found himself, dizzy and shaken, alone and utterly lost among the countless hills.

With the feeling that he must find his way somehow before night fell, he rose and walked forward, trying to guide himself by the position of the sun in the heavens, and taking note, as far as it was possible where each hill resembled its neighbour in a seemingly endless succession, of the nature of the land.

After wearily trudging for some miles, with a splitting headache, under a pitiless blue sky from which the fierce afternoon sun shone down relentlessly with never a cloud to soften the glare, he came to a halt and sat down to rest on a convenient boulder beside a guarrie bush. His hat was gone, lost in his horse's wild flight, and he had discarded his coat as too hot to walk in, and too heavy to carry. It struck him

now that he had been foolish to leave the coat behind. It was quite possible that he would be benighted, and it was chilly in the evenings when the fog gathered in the valley and the dew fell. Many a man had contracted fever that way.

He rested his arms on his knees, and fell to thinking. Never in his life had he felt so utterly alone. The silence was oppressive. Nothing moved in the sultry stillness; there was no sound or sight of a living thing, other than his own motionless figure seated on the boulder. Heckraft had never before experienced such solitariness. The silence appealed to him like something sentient that listens and waits.

He had not recovered sufficiently from his fall to be able to gauge his whereabouts, but it occurred to him that possibly the horse would return to its stable, in which case Gommet would doubtless institute a search, though a search under such conditions might well prove fruitless. There was nothing for it but to push forward, and trust to striking the road eventually, or a homestead of sorts on the veld. He had no stomach for being benighted among the hills.

When he was rested he got up and struggled on. After what seemed to him in his weakened condition an interminable time, but was in reality little more than an hour's steady march, he found himself on the brow of one of the hills, and, pausing, looked about him in the evening light. If he had hoped to discover a road by his climb, or some familiar landmark, he was disappointed. The prospect revealed nothing but waste places, vast tracts of uncultivated, undulating land. It recalled to his mind the allegory of the Temptation, when the Lord was taken up into an exceeding high mountain and shown all the cities of the world. He looked away into immeasurable distance, a distance that melted into blue haze which

softened the flat tableland effect of the far-away hills where they merged with the sky and became one with it, cloudlike shadow land against a melting background of blue. Hills stretched before and around him, hills undulating and receding like ocean waves, broken, irregular land, with never a sign of a habitation, only the blue atmospheric haze hanging over it like a veil, and the wonderful colouring, the sharp contrast of light and shade seen only in lands where the sun has made its home.

Heckraft found shelter under a boulder and sat down.

"I've reached the limit," he muttered. "I can go no further."

He pulled a few handfuls of grass and scrub, and made himself a pillow, and so lay back and rested, keeping a watchful eye on the prospect, ready to hail if anyone came within sight. The sun topped the brow of the hill and dipped behind it, and the shadows began to lengthen and deepen in the valley. Heckraft recalled tales he had heard of men being lost in the veld for days, even weeks. One man, he had been told, had walked in a circle for nine weeks, brute instinct keeping him from wandering away from the water which was his sole hope of life. He had existed on roots, till chance wayfarers had found him eventually out of his mind, a wild man who fled from his kind, and took shelter in an ant-bear's hole in the veld. He had never doubted the tale, which indeed he knew to be well authenticated, but alone as he was now in that wonderful silence, with no clue to direct him to a possible road, with the knowledge that every step he took might be leading him further out of his way, he realised how easy it was to miss the trail. His horse had lost it for him when it got beyond his control, and he had increased the diffi-

culty by starting out to recover it while his mind was still too dazed to work intelligently. He had got himself into a worse plight than if he had remained where he fell.

He was fully alive now to the fact that he would probably have to pass the night on the veld; and he made himself as comfortable as he could in the circumstances, thankful that he had his pipe with him, and enough tobacco, if he used it sparingly, to last him several hours.

The light was falling quickly, fading abruptly, as it does in Africa, from day into night. Looking about him in the falling dusk, Heckraft presently descried a figure moving with quick, irregular strides towards him. He took the figure at first sight to be that of a native, and, springing up, hailed him loudly. The coloured man, at any rate, would be able to guide him to some place; and shelter even in a Kaffir hut, he opined in his beautiful ignorance of Kaffir interiors, would serve for the night.

He shouted again. If the traveller heard him, he made no sign, but came on with his strange, swinging stride, which changed every now and again to a feeble halting gait, half-shuffle, as though some obstacle impeded his progress. He walked with his chin sunk on his breast, and his hands clasped in front of him. As he came nearer, Heckraft's expression changed from interest to amazement. The man was white, but so ragged and unkempt, with a wild mat of dark hair straggling over his face and shading his eyes, that it took more than a cursory glance to discover the European beneath the disguise of sun-bronzed, dirty skin, and tangled beard. He was barefooted, and about his wrists, Heckraft observed, and, observing, at once suspected foul play of which this sorry looking object had been the victim, was bound

a thick rope, one end of which trailed along the ground, and occasionally entangled itself in his feet.

"Hallo!" Heckraft called out reassuringly, as soon as the man came within speaking range. "What's happened?"

In the silence which followed his question, for the newcomer made no response, a queer chilled feeling crept over him. Something in the expression of the fierce, restless eyes, glaring out from under the matted thatch of hair, cunning with the cunning of an animal but entirely lacking in intelligence, warned him that he was face to face with a lunatic. What had been a sufficiently uncomfortable position before the advent of this uncouth object was rendered by the intrusion highly disturbing and dangerous. Heckraft had not the least idea how to cope with a madman; and the person confronting him, motionless, save for the restless eyes which never wavered far from the other's face, was a big, powerfully built man who, if it came to a struggle, must inevitably win the day. And the bound wrists, as Heckraft now saw, were only a part of the make believe in the lunatic's imaginary world; the rope hung loosely upon the bony wrists, wound about them doubtless by the man himself. He could, if he wished to, free his hands in a moment. It was not reassuring with night coming on to find oneself on the veld alone with a lunatic.

"Good evening," Heckraft said, embarrassed by the persistent stare of the strange eyes, and their owner's equally persistent silence. "I am a little out of my reckoning. Could you set me in the right direction for Inchanga?"

His companion could not have paid less attention if he had been stone deaf. He made no sign that he heard the question. It occurred to Heckraft that

possibly, if he heard the words, they conveyed no meaning to him. He tried to recall some of the Dutch phrases which Alieta had taught him, but could think of nothing that would fit the circumstances, and, after a tentative, "Goen daag, Mynheer. Waar gaan jij?" which met with no further response than his English had done, he gave it up as hopeless. When a white man in South Africa responds to neither Dutch nor English it is reasonable to conclude that it is because he will not, or otherwise that he cannot hear.

Heckraft started to walk, unmindful, in the disturbed state of his feelings, of his former fatigue. He must shake off this weird silent creature; to pass the night in such company was an unendurable thought. But as he walked the tall, gaunt figure kept pace with him, never speaking, keeping shoulder to shoulder with a gregarious instinct purely animal, and, for all that he never turned his head, watching him stealthily, Heckraft felt, every inch of the way. Finding that he could not thus rid himself of his uncomfortable companion, he made a right about turn and started walking in the opposite direction, with, however, the same result. His odd companion wheeled about also, and accompanied him as before like his shadow, the route that was travelled seemingly being of no importance to him.

Accepting the inevitable, and tired out, Heckraft flung himself down on the ground. He could go no further. If this strange being with the clouded mind and limpet-like tendency were set in his purpose to remain beside him, he could do nothing, save pass the night in a wakeful vigilance, and so be prepared against attack. After all, it was possible that the man was harmless; he had shown no inclination towards violence so far. Had it not been for the

furtive watchfulness of the wild eyes he would have felt reassured, but he believed that any unexpected movement on his part would be noted and possibly misconstrued. The poor wretch was doubtless distrustful, like himself, and prepared, as he was, for attack. He was half afraid to feel in his pocket for his tobacco pouch, but he could not keep awake all night without smoking, and he dared not sleep.

The lunatic had seated himself opposite him, bolt upright. The tall figure was almost indistinguishable now in the gathering darkness. Heckraft could dimly see an outline against the sky, and the roving whites of the prominent eyeballs in the dark vacant face which was turned ever in his direction.

"Join me in a smoke?" he asked, more by way of explaining his action in going to his pocket than in courtesy or expectation of a response.

There was no reply to the question, but when Heckraft produced the pouch and started to fill his pipe from it, a large, clawlike hand reached out and grabbed it, and, tearing the pouch in his eagerness to get at the contents, the creature snatched at the tobacco, and, thrusting it into his mouth, devoured it as an animal devours food. Heckraft, lighting his pipe for fear of losing the little he had secured for himself, watched by the flaring light of the match he held the disappearance of the precious weed he had been depending upon to solace him during his long vigil. The madman's voracity, the horrible eagerness of the face and the dirty, clutching fingers, repelled, even while it fascinated him.

The match burnt down to his fingers, spluttered, and went out. The last thing he saw distinctly before the darkness closed in on them once more was the hungry glint in the fierce eyes, as their owner flung the empty pouch away from him, having no further

use for it, and glared at the man who had produced it in a mute demand for more. Heckraft fully expected that the pipe would be snatched from him, and it annoyed him to reflect that if such were the madman's will he was powerless to resist him.

But the odd creature made no attempt to molest his companion. He sat silent and observant, watching the friendly glow of the pipe until it burnt itself out, and the smoker was left sucking at the cold stem, gritting his teeth upon it to keep himself awake, while his eyelids drooped with weariness, and his flannel shirt became wet and sodden with the fog and the heavy dews. And so they sat, this ill-assorted pair, wakeful and silent throughout the long night.

XIV

THAT night was to Heckraft as an actively realised nightmare. At first in his extreme physical fatigue he had thought it impossible to keep awake, but, sitting opposite this strange being, who bore the outer semblance of a man, and possessed the instincts of an animal, he knew that he could not sleep. Horror at being alone with something so uncanny, something which he could not see in the darkness, for the night was the blackest he remembered to have ever experienced, but which he could distinctly hear breathing beside him, deep, heavy, animal breathing, and which occasionally stirred, as an animal stirs, shifting its position for its greater ease, kept him constantly on the alert. Had he closed his eyes sleep might have overtaken him, but in the circumstances he could not close them. He remained staring wildly into the darkness, until the black pall slowly lifted, and the sky, which had closed in upon the earth, as it were, gradually receded, marking its boundary by a pale uncertain line.

As soon as it was light enough to travel he rose, and his strange companion, who apparently had not slept either, and who seemed no whit fatigued by his long vigil, rose with him and accompanied him on his way. Heckraft was glad to stretch his cramped and stiffened muscles, and as he walked, and the mists lifted from the valley, rolling away

before the rays of the early sun, his wet clothes began to dry and a grateful warmth stole through his aching limbs. The early day was wonderfully fair. Masses of purplish white clouds hung low towards the horizon in an otherwise unstained blue sky; the shadows of the past night still lingered on the hillsides, reluctant to retreat before the newly risen sun which was just beginning to show above the tree tops. And in the clear air the more distant hills stood out like a long range of mountains against the sky.

It seemed to Heckraft that they walked for hours, up one hill and down the next. He could not be certain whether the lunatic had any definite line of route in his clouded brain which his feet instinctively followed, but he realised that he was now unquestionably taking the lead. Since he had neither instinct nor knowledge to guide himself, he followed mechanically, hoping, rather than expecting, that this poor demented human silence might find a way out.

His hope strengthened after a while; the face of the land grew more familiar as they walked, and afar off he descried the wattle plantations lining the slopes of the hills. Twice he sat down to rest; and each time his weird guide followed his example, waiting with impassive unconcern for him to rise and resume the journey. Heckraft had grown accustomed to the silent creature's presence. The horror of him which he had known during the night had worn off with the darkness, dissipated as much by the lunatic's inoffensive manner as by the daylight which diminishes most terrors. The poor creature was after all but a harmless wanderer of the veld; his overnight alarm appeared disproportionate to him now. In an odd, inexplicable sense he felt that a bond of comradeship existed between him and his

strange companion for all the unbroken silence of that weary march. Nevertheless it was with a feeling of deep relief that he came at last upon a point he recognised, from whence he could quite easily strike the road. In his eagerness he quickened his pace; and now he took the lead, for the lunatic showed no desire to make for the open road. He followed reluctantly, trailing his rope behind him, determined, it would appear, upon one thing only, that of not being separated from his overnight companion.

As they came within view of the road, Heckraft saw a sight which rejoiced his heart and made him realise for the first time how deadly tired he was. A motor was coming along in the distance, travelling at such a rate that, unless he hastened his footsteps, he recognised that it would pass before he gained the road. He pointed it out to his companion, and hurried forward, scarce noticing in his excitement that the poor demented being who had clung to him so pertinaciously hitherto no longer kept pace with him, but fell gradually behind, following him still, but at a distance which he allowed to slowly widen between them.

The car, Heckcraft discovered as it drew nearer, was driven by Johnson, and the girl seated beside him, with a little woollen cap worn over her wayward curls, was none other than Alieta Van der Vyver. He hailed them loudly, and Johnson, looking round and seeing him, stopped the car and waited for him to come up.

"Good Lord! it's Heckraft," he said, and leaned over the side of the car as Heckraft, panting from his late exertions, gained the road. "What on earth are you doing here? . . . and on foot?"

Alieta, with her readier intuition, observing Heckraft's dishevelled appearance and his unmistakably

exhausted condition, jumped to the correct conclusion.

"It's that brute of a horse," she exclaimed. "You've been thrown?"

He smiled at her.

"All that happened yesterday afternoon," he said.

Alieta sprang down from the car and opened the door of the tonneau.

"Get in," she said. "We'll drive you home."

"But," Johnson remonstrated, "we're going the other way." . . .

Alieta cut him short.

"We have all the day before us," she said in a tone that admitted of no contradiction. "And we are going first to Drummond."

"Oh! well, I suppose there's nothing else for it."

Johnson looked sulky as he watched Alieta ministering to the manager's comfort. He found himself wishing their start had been timed earlier, so that they had avoided this delay. If the man were such a fool as to get thrown, why shouldn't he foot it?"

"Who's your seedy looking friend?" he asked, staring in the direction of the now retreating figure of the madman, whom Heckraft had almost forgotten in the pleasure and relief of the meeting; now recollecting, he looked round with sudden thought for his late companion.

"It's some poor chap who has lost his wits," he explained. "He came across me last evening, and pretty nearly scared the wits out of me. He seems to have lost his power of speech also."

"Oh, that! That's mad Hantz," Alieta said, glancing up. "He's quite harmless, poor dear!"

"Harmless!" Johnson emitted a short laugh. "They call every madman out here harmless until a tragedy occurs, then, when the harm is done, they lock him up."

"Well, anyhow, Hantz isn't likely to do much harm," Alieta said, smiling. "His poor crooked brain harbours but one idea: he is looking for the devil to destroy him. It is a pity some of us saner folk haven't the same ambition."

"It would have been a jolly awkward thing for Heckraft," Johnson observed with a grin, "if Hantz had mistaken him for the object of his search. He's a hefty fellow. I wouldn't like to run foul of him. Get up, Alieta. I'm sure Heckraft isn't so damaged that he can't tuck the cover round his own knees."

Alieta flushed, faintly annoyed; then, her eyes meeting Heckraft's, she smiled.

"You do look tired," she said, and added over her shoulder for Johnson's benefit: "All right, bear; I'm coming. Hand me your flask first."

Johnson complied ungraciously.

"You'd better get in beside him, and hold his hand," he said with disagreeable sarcasm.

Again Alieta's eyes sought Heckraft's, and again she smiled.

"I am tempted to," she answered, and passed the flask to Heckraft, who accepted it gladly. "Refresh yourself with that," she directed him. "There's more in it than is good for Harold, and a man in rude health, as he is, ought not to carry a flask."

"In which case, how could he effectively render first aid?" Johnson demanded in quick self-defence.

"A fine lot of first aid you are rendering," Alieta said.

"Seeing you are doing all that, it would be waste of energy for me to hang over the other side of him," her lover retorted acrimoniously. "Women make such a rotten fuss about trifles. . . . All right, Heckraft? . . . Then jump in, Alieta."

This time Alieta complied, and, half turning in her

seat, conversed with Heckraft as they spun along. Johnson, to use his own expression, let the car rip. The time he was losing over this job had to be made up somehow; he had no intention of devoting a minute more than was necessary to any unwelcome third party. It was a stroke of ill-luck, he considered, a bad start to his day, that Heckraft should have happened across their path.

"How did you manage to come off the horse?" he asked, during a pause in Alieta's flow of talk. "Thought you prided yourself you could sit a horse that bucked."

"I didn't allow for holes in the veld when I made that boast," Heckraft answered, with half contemptuous amusement at the injured tone in which the question was put.

"Oh! came down with you, did he? . . . Your fault, then, and not the animal's. . . . Slovenly riding, that."

Heckraft did not trouble to go deeper into the matter. He knew that Johnson was annoyed at having to turn back, that he could not conceal his annoyance. In a sense, even while feeling bitterly antagonistic towards him, he sympathised with the man. The antagonism had its root in the knowledge —a knowledge which, he imagined, would have been distasteful in any circumstances—of Johnson's claim upon the girl they both loved. To hear him address her in his authoritative manner roused a demon of anger in him which he had the greatest difficulty to restrain. He admired tremendously the way in which Alieta dealt with his peevish moods. She was a woman possessing immense tact, he decided, and a large nature.

"There isn't any need for me to run you down the hill, is there?" Johnson inquired, when they

reached the highest point of the road between the woods. "It's not far after you turn the bend, and it's a beastly climb up again."

"Nonsense, Harold!" Alieta expostulated. "We are going all the way."

But Heckraft insisted upon getting out.

"This is nothing," he assured her. "I can manage this very well."

He shut the door of the tonneau, and came round to her side. Johnson, intent on losing no time, was already backing the car for the purpose of turning it in the confined space, and Heckraft had to watch his opportunity to take the hand Alieta held out to him. He had only time to press it, and utter a few words of thanks, before the car made a bound forward, and disappeared in a cloud of dust, leaving Heckraft inwardly fuming, as he turned his back upon the dust-cloud and continued his way down the hill.

When he came opposite the sheds he caught sight of Gommet calmly pursuing his usual occupation. A wagon load of bark had come in and was being unloaded and run up to the loft in small trolleys. He dodged the trolleys, and went inside. It was evident from Gommet's unconcerned greeting that he had no suspicion of anything untoward having occurred. He had indeed put an altogether different construction on Heckraft's absence, and he expressed not the least surprise on seeing him walk in.

"Did the horse come back?" was Heckraft's first question.

It was Gommet's first intimation that horse and rider had been separated. He evinced some show of astonishment at his partner's words. As a matter of fact, the horse was then in its stable; but the Coolie in charge, who had found the animal waiting

outside when he came to his work in the morning, had apparently considered the matter not worthy of reporting.

"I've heard nothing about the horse," Gommet answered. "Didn't you ride him home?"

"I haven't seen him since he came down with me yesterday afternoon," Heckraft replied, effectually rousing the engineer, who swung round and surveyed the speaker critically, a sympathetic interest in the look.

"Then where in hell did you spend the night?" he demanded, a question which in ordinary circumstances he would not have put to any man; but this explanation of the overnight absence altered the complexion of affairs.

"On the veld," Heckraft answered, and added, with a laugh which in Gommet's ears did not ring true,—"in the company of a balmly person who, I understand, is searching for the devil. I haven't slept a wink, old man,—daren't close my eyes for sheer funk,—and I'm literally starving."

Gommet leant towards him across the engine he was overhauling, leaning with his hands on the spanner, which he had been using, while they talked.

"How did you get here?" he asked.

"Johnson motored me to the top of the hill. I met him on the road."

"Anyone with him?"

"Yes."

The engineer did not pursue his interrogations further; apparently he was satisfied. The dispirited tone of his companion's reply told him all he wanted to know.

"You cut across, and let Rudgubadi feed you," he counselled; "no machinery can keep going without fuel. Then tumble in between the sheets. I'll see

to things. Don't you worry about your boys. I'll put the fear of God into them, so that they'll turn out a full day's work without you bossing round. Get, man! And don't waste time at the stables. I'll inquire about that blasted horse. . . . If you won't give up riding him, I'll hamstring him."

Heckraft rose from the stack of timber on which he had taken a seat, and turned to the opening.

"Oh! it wasn't the horse's fault this time," he muttered. "Johnson will tell you. . . . It was my slovenly riding that was to blame."

He yawned heavily and, passing out into the sunshine, crossed the road to Gommet's house, walking with a dragging, weary gait, and bent, dejected shoulders.

XV

HECKRAFT did not see Alieta for a long while after the morning meeting on the veld when she had been motoring with Johnson. He understood from Gommet that she was away from home. Gommet and he were both fairly busy, giving all that was left of the daylight after they finished work to the supervision of their joint property. The plantation was already started. The young trees were beginning to grow, as were also the weeds; the ground required constant care and cultivation.

To see Gommet riding round his young plantation was like watching a child with a new toy, in the keen enjoyment of his pleasure. He had taken a grip of things again, had discovered an interest in life; and it was not exactly surprising that he should feel a certain affection for the man who, their paths crossing at a critical juncture, had quickened the old, half-dead interests into new life. It was through Heckraft's hold on things, through the happy optimism of his nature, that this man with his shattered ideals and his disappointed hopes had discovered something fresh in life that made it still worth the having, still worth a fight. He had been slipping down the hill; now he was beginning to climb, and the exertion necessary to the effort was proving beneficial.

The summer was over; the barking of the trees was practically finished, and the Coolies were busy cutting up the seasoned timber and cultivating the

land to allow the young trees to grow. It was, as Alieta had expressed it, the slack season. Heckraft bethought himself of her invitation to take his violin to Odsani and play to her; but since she was away from home there was no object in a visit, and when he learnt—again from Gommet, who appeared surprisingly conversant with Alieta's movements—that she was back, he still hesitated. He waited to see her again, and receive from her more direct encouragement before he felt emboldened to show himself at Odsani.

And then unexpectedly a rush of events turned his thoughts into other channels, and love slipped into the background for a time to yield place to the exigency of a tragedy that made a special demand upon his sympathies,—the consummation of the tragedy of Gommet's unhappy married life.

The post brought Gommet a letter one morning, the contents of which had a very disturbing effect upon him. Epistles of a private nature were rare with the engineer; his meagre correspondence consisted for the greater part of business letters. He was standing talking with Heckraft on the stoep while they waited for breakfast when the post came in. It brought only the one letter, and as soon as the recipient took it and saw the writing he turned away and went into the house. Heckraft heard him go into his own room, and close and lock the door behind him. As he did not come out again, Heckraft breakfasted alone. He dawdled over the meal in the expectation of Gommet joining him, but when, having finished, the latter still did not appear, he picked up his hat from the chair where he had flung it upon entering, and was going out, when something prompted him to pay a visit first to Gommet's room. He felt inexplicably worried on Gommet's account,

though he could not have explained, had he been questioned, the particular form his anxiety took; it was more a vague, unaccountable uneasiness than an actual dread of any definite happening. He tapped on the door of Gommet's room.

"Coming out, old man?" he called. "I'm just off."

There was no response. He shook the door-handle sharply, whereupon a voice from within answered, a voice so unlike Gommet's that he scarcely recognised it.

"For God's sake, leave me alone for just five minutes longer."

Heckraft was moving away when he suddenly arrested his steps and came back. On consideration it occurred to him that there was in the words, or it may have been in the tone in which they were uttered, a significance that sounded portentous. He drew quietly nearer and listened outside the door. A noise like the striking of a match was audible within the room, and was repeated twice. Gommet was presumedly setting fire to something. Whatever it was he burnt, he set his foot upon it and stamped on the charred remains. Then he crossed the room, and Heckraft heard him at the dressing-table, heard a drawer open and shut, followed by a sound with which he was sufficiently familiar to recognise it immediately, the sound of a razor being stropped. Why should a man who has finished his toilet require to sharpen his razor?

Heckraft waited for nothing further. It did not weigh with him that his fears might prove groundless, and his conduct therefore peculiarly offensive and difficult of explanation. He was determined to gain admittance to the room, and, since Gommet would not open the door, he set his knee and shoulder against it and forced the lock.

The scene which met his gaze justified his worst fears. Gommet faced him, his right hand still clutching the bloody razor, the crimson blood streaming from a wound in his throat, soaking his shirt and waistcoat, and dripping on to the floor. He had been startled in the act, and the razor had slipped in his nervous grasp and done its work ill.

With a spring Heckraft was upon him, and they struggled until Gommet's strength was exhausted for possession of the razor. When he had secured it, Heckraft slipped it into his pocket, and then in a business-like manner he proceeded to tear a sheet off the bed into strips and to hastily bandage the gaping wound. He realised that unless he staunched the blood somehow Gommet would die before he could fetch assistance. He was extraordinarily collected. Later, he knew that he had acted in automatic obedience to certain instincts that told him what was best to do in the circumstances. It was not until he had left Gommet lying on the bed, watched over by Rudgubadi, and Rudgubadi's young nephew, Mambersad, that he realised how tremendous had been the strain on his nerves. He was shaking like a man sick with palsy.

He hurried to the stable and seized his horse, which was ready saddled, waiting for him to ride to his work. The horse shied at the smell of blood, and he noticed for the first time that his clothes were stained with blood, Gommet's as well as his own; for he had cut his hand badly in wresting the razor from the other's grasp. He mounted and rode off at full gallop.

The nearest doctor lived at Inchanga; there would be sufficient delay, even if he had the luck to find him in when he got there, before he could reach the scene of the tragedy.

On the road he overtook Alieta, riding in the same direction. He passed her with only a salute, and thundered on; but Alieta had seen his tense face and the blood which had soaked through the handkerchief he had hastily wrapped about his hand before starting, and, believing that he was injured, she touched her horse smartly with the whip, and rode hard until she came up with him.

"What's the matter?" she called to him against the wind that was stinging their faces as they thundered along the hard road.

"It's Gommet," he answered, without decreasing his pace. "I'm going for the doctor."

Alieta felt unaccountably relieved.

"But you are hurt yourself," she persisted. "There's blood on your hand—and clothes."

"It's mostly Gommet's," he said.

"Then he is injured? . . . There has been an accident?"

She struck her horse with the whip again, and kept neck and neck with the other horse.

"Yes," he answered through his teeth, and turned his head suddenly to look at her. "You stick to that," he said, "whatever happens."

"Is it serious?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I'm hoping I'll find him alive when I get back."

Alieta allowed her horse to fall behind, and Heckraft rode forward alone, too preoccupied to notice when she actually parted from him, but feeling unconsciously relieved at being no longer obliged to talk. The strain and excitement were telling on his nerves. He felt physically done.

Fortunately the doctor was in when he drew rein before his house and flung himself from the saddle. A motor stood at the door; five minutes later and

the doctor would have left on his rounds. Briefly Heckraft explained what had happened; and the doctor took his bag, and got into the waiting car, and drove straightway to the scene of what Heckraft persisted in calling an accident. Doctor Seely had heard of such accidents before. It was not an unknown thing for a man when he was shaving to let the razor slip and nearly decapitate himself. He reckoned that, if it were not a case for a coroner's jury, it would be a matter of about four stitches, and end in constant anxiety and watchfulness on the part of the man's friends to prevent a recurrence of the carelessness. Usually in these cases the coroner's jury was the simplest way out.

When the medical man had started, Heckraft remounted his sweating, panting horse, and rode back at a more leisurely pace. Now that the urgency for action was past he felt strangely incapable of further effort. He sat his horse loosely, and let it choose its own pace, experiencing in his fear of what might have occurred during his absence a strong reluctance to return. It occurred to him as very possible that the doctor when he arrived would find that he was too late.

When he got back the motor stood in front of the house, and Mambersad was squatting at the side of the road, in charge of a horse with a side-saddle on its back. Heckraft looked quickly at the horse and discovered that it was Alieta's. What, he wondered, was Alieta doing there?

He flung the rein of his own horse to the urchin and went inside. No one was about. He listened for a while outside Gommet's room, and then passed on and entered the kitchen. Rudgubadi was there, putting fresh logs on the fire. She turned as he entered, her dark, thin-featured, handsome face inscrut-

able as the face of the Sphinx. Indian women are strangely reticent, and seldom betray emotion. Experience told Heckraft that if the worst had happened she would most probably turn to him the same impassive countenance.

"How's the sahib?" he demanded.

"The sahib sleeps," she answered; and he knew that if the sahib were dead, or if he lay simply with his eyes closed, her answer would be the same.

"Is the missis inside with the doctor sahib?" he asked.

Rudgubadi lowered her eyelids so that the flicker of interest his question aroused should not betray itself. Had not this missis with the white face and the hair that was as the colour of the mimosa blossoms driven her from the room so that she might watch by the sahib alone?

"That missis come when this sahib ride away," she said in her slow, soft voice. "That missis stay."

Heckraft returned to the living-room to wait. He was curious to see Alieta. Why had she come? He hated to think of her all that time, before the doctor came, alone, watching beside the gruesome, blood-stained figure he had left lying on the bed. It was like Alieta to have done what she did. . . . He tried to recall what he had said to her on the road, but his mind had been in a state of such chaos that that fragmentary conversation with her had left no clear impression. He hoped he had prepared her in a sense for what she had found. . . . Anyway, there was no use in thinking about that now; she was there; and he knew in his heart that he was glad.

Her arrival, had he known it, had helped in the saving of Gommet's life. She had been able to prevent Gommet—which the Indians Heckraft had left on watch would never have been able to do—from tear-

ing off the bandages that had been bound about his throat. She had taken command immediately on her arrival, and because she believed that the dark, impassive faces of the servants disturbed their master, she sent them from the room, and remained alone to watch until the doctor came.

She had behaved splendidly, the doctor confided later to Heckraft. He had never seen a woman display greater nerve. She had been a tremendous help to him. He had stitched up the hole in Gommet's throat, and pronounced him as likely, in the event of nothing unforeseen occurring, to do well.

"And now tell me," he said as he was preparing to leave, "what made him do it. . . . We'll allow the accident, of course. We understand that. But what was the direct cause of the accident? Has he been depressed at all lately? . . . or worried? Has he given you any intimation that he was likely to make an attempt on his life?"

"No," Heckraft answered. "On the contrary, he has been unusually cheerful, and engrossed with a new enterprise in which we are both interested. I know of nothing that could have worried him,—unless he received bad news in a letter he got this morning. The receipt of the letter I fancied at the time upset him."

"Who was the letter from?" the doctor inquired.

Heckraft shook his head.

"I didn't see it. He carried it to his room, and I've reason to suppose destroyed it before—before the accident occurred."

"And you've no idea who his correspondent was?"

"No. . . . That is, I don't know; but one may form an opinion. . . . He has a wife somewhere."

The doctor knew Gommet's story; he knew Mrs.

Gommet, though he had no knowledge of her present whereabouts. Heckraft's opinion coincided with his.

"If Mrs. Gommet could be got at. . . ." he said.

He examined the inside of his hat carefully as though he expected to find a clue to Mrs. Gommet's address in the crown, and then put the hat deliberately on his head.

"The worst of this kind of accident," he remarked, "is that occasionally it is repeated. . . . He'll need watching."

Then he took his bag and went out to the car.

"I'll look in again this evening," he called to Heckraft, who accompanied him out to the stoep. And, perhaps because Heckraft kept his hand behind him, or perhaps on account of the unusual nature of the morning's doings, he forgot to attend to the hand which he had previously noticed was injured.

XVI

HECKRAFT turned back into the living-room and came face to face with Alieta. The encounter rushed upon him unexpectedly and left him with nothing to say. He had known, of course, that she was in the house, but he had not prepared his mind to meet her, and coming upon her thus suddenly beneath his own roof, as it were, caused him an extraordinary sense of embarrassment which he failed to hide with any degree of success.

Alieta wore a riding skirt, but she had taken off her hat which gave her the appearance somehow of being at home. Whatever she felt she had a far greater air of ease than the man who, conscious only that a sequence of untoward circumstances had brought this woman whom he was striving to forget into the common routine of his daily life, into his home, realized the futility, the hopeless absurdity, of attempting to put her out of his thoughts. She was established in his heart as surely as the stars were fixed in their orbit, and he possessed no greater power to dislodge her than was his to displace the heavenly bodies.

He came to a halt in the opening of the window and gazed at her helplessly; Alieta, grave, but perfectly matter-of-fact, addressed him as though her presence there were quite an ordinary event calling for neither comment nor explanation.

"I want to write a note," she said, and looked about her for materials.

Heckraft silently provided a pen and note paper and watched her while she sat at the table and wrote. She folded her letter and addressed it, then, rising, she handed it to him.

"Will you send that to Odsani for me?" she asked, and added: "It's to explain that I'm staying here. I want some things. And I've asked them to send old Katje to help me. She knows quite a lot about nursing."

He advanced his left hand for the note.

"I thought of sending to Durban or Maritzburg for trained nurses," he said, and fidgeted with the envelope in his fingers. He felt infinitely relieved when she quashed the idea.

"But the expense!" she expostulated. . . . "Besides, it isn't necessary. All that Mr. Gommet needs Katje and I can do for him. I don't think he'd thank you for your trained nurses."

"I'm sure he wouldn't," Heckraft answered. "But I wasn't thinking of him."

Alieta looked at him fixedly.

"In the veld we learn to wait upon ourselves and to help one another," she said simply. . . . "I suppose in England a woman wouldn't walk into your house, if you were sick, and take charge of things?"

He parried this.

"No woman has done that much for me," he answered, and thought what an admirable thing it would be if life were less complex, and humanity could follow its natural impulses instead of conforming to rule.

Alieta smiled at him suddenly, and her smile was wondrously sweet.

"Send the note off," she said, "and tell somebody to see that Fleetfoot is made comfortable at the stables. Then come back to me here, and let me dress

your hand. I wonder the doctor didn't attend to it."

"He meant to. . . . I suppose he forgot." Heckraft looked at the bloodstained handkerchief. "It's just a cut," he said.

Then he went out again by the window, and Alieta fetched water and lint and bandages, of which the doctor had left a supply, and waited for his return. He was absent some while; the girl knew, without being informed, that he was seeing himself to the welfare of her horse; and she stood at the window and watched for him. As she had expected, he came from the direction of the stables. He was very apologetic when he entered, over the blood-stained handkerchief, which he removed himself, and the condition of his clothes. But Alieta was not upset at the sight of blood; she had seen plenty of it that morning.

"This is the second time," she remarked, "that I have acted for you in this capacity. You seem to be peculiarly unfortunate."

"Most people would disagree with you there. . . . I do myself," he said.

She flushed warmly at his words, and smilingly directed him to put his hand in the basin of cold water. She bathed the blood from it and dried it in a soft towel.

"These are nasty cuts," she said, and pressed the flesh together with her fingers.

The touch of her cool hands sent the blood coursing madly through Heckraft's veins. His emotions were so riotous that he could not trust himself to speak, could do nothing, save stare at her dumbly as she bent over her task, his eager eyes devouring her fairness with a devotion that unwittingly transmitted itself to her subconsciousness. Embarrassed, without understanding the reason of her embarrassment, Alieta

busied herself with strapping up the deep incisions made by the razor; her hands trembled slightly over their work, but she did not remove her gaze from what she was doing, save, perhaps, to note the quickened beating of the pulse in the strong brown wrist of the hand she held in a light, firm grasp. She was sensible of the emotional tension between them; her own rapidly beating heart called for other explanation than mere nervous excitement following on a succession of shocks such as she had experienced that morning. She understood vaguely that the physical contact necessary to her present ministration was strangely disturbing, and realised further that it was dangerous because the disturbance was sweet.

Dismayed by what was revealed in this rapid analysis of her emotions, she turned from further self-revelation and gave her mind up completely to what she was doing. She was a moral coward; she knew it. She dared not face, dared not even admit the truth. So long as it was not put into words she could ignore it. . . .

She bandaged his hand deftly, and stitched the bandage at the wrist, bending her head when she had finished to snap the cotton with her teeth. With her face so near to his hand, Heckraft had a mad impulse to seize and kiss her, but he restrained himself. Such an act, he felt, would be sheer folly, and might put her out of his reach for ever. He would wait a little longer and choose his time judiciously. Since his wooing must commence with weaning her from the allegiance of her former troth it would be unwise to be precipitate; it might prejudice his cause. As things were, he felt, looking at her changing face, his case was not altogether hopeless. Gommet, and his own earlier instincts, had been right; she was not wholly indifferent.

"That will serve," Alieta said, releasing his hand, but still not looking at him, "until the doctor comes again, when it would be as well to let him dress it properly."

"Thank you," Heckraft answered quietly. "I wouldn't let anyone touch that hand now."

"Ach! you are foolish," Alieta returned quickly.

She gathered up the appliances she had brought with her, and was leaving the room when he stopped her to inquire whether he could be of any assistance. She assured him she needed no help. The doctor had given the patient something to calm him; he was drowsy, and seemed inclined to sleep.

"Well," Heckraft said, "if you want me I shall be only across the road at the sheds."

He went out, and remained away until the dinner hour, so that he was not present on Mrs. Van der Vyver's arrival. He saw her arrive with old Katje, and Banini in the buggy, but he did not feel that his appearance would be welcome, or that it would help in any way at the interview between mother and daughter. He anticipated trouble between Alieta and her mother, but it was the daughter he backed to get her own way in the end. Alieta, once she had made up her mind, was not easily moved.

Alieta anticipated trouble also; for which reason she met her mother on the stoep, and impressed upon her before allowing her to enter the necessity for quiet. The patient was sleeping; on no account must he be disturbed.

Mrs. Van der Vyver looked fixedly at her daughter. There was, despite the fact that the elder woman had never been as good-looking, a striking resemblance between them. And the resemblance was not only physical; they were both possessed of the same indomitable will. During all the years of Alieta's life

her mother's will had prevailed over hers; but the turn of youth comes inevitably with the growth of the reasoning powers, and the realisation of strength; and on that day Alieta stepped into her kingdom, and asserted her right to think and act independently, to the confusion of maternal authority, and to the complete disruption of the old relationship, which, though neither had recognised it, had been straining thin for some time. The suddenness with which Alieta wrested her authority from her overwhelmed Mrs. Van der Vyver. She felt too bewildered and inadequate even to rebel.

"It is not your place to nurse Mr. Gommet," she protested. "It is his wife's duty."

Alieta's warm brown eyes looked steadily back into the speaker's.

"If I knew where to find his wife," she returned, "I would fetch her. . . . As things are, what can I do?"

"They should take him to Maritzburg to the hospital," Mrs. Van der Vyver said.

"And that would mean dragging all this miserable affair into the papers," the girl answered. "When we can prevent it, why serve a neighbour like that?"

And then Mrs. Van der Vyver put her actual fear into words.

"People will think evil of you," she said. "They will say that you make an excuse of nursing Mr. Gommet for the sake of being near Mr. Heckraft."

Alieta flushed. This was a charge she had not foreseen; its very unexpectedness made her wince.

"I had not thought of that," she replied, and hesitated, chafing inwardly because this view of things had such power to wound and distress her. Why should people imagine that? . . . Why, if others imagined it, should not Mr. Heckraft himself place a

similar construction on her action? And then suddenly it was borne in upon her beyond question that Heckraft would not think thus, and with the guarantee of her conviction on this point it became a matter of less importance what the world in general thought.

"Surely no one could be so foolish, or so mean spirited as that?" she said.

"The folly lies with you," Mrs. Van der Vyver retorted, "in providing food for talk. The world has a wide mouth and a gluttonous capacity for such food; and when two constructions can be placed on one's doings, the worse is sure to be chosen."

"If you think so meanly of human nature, why trouble about its opinion?" Alieta asked with an indifference which exasperated her hearer.

"We have got to live in the world," was the sharp retort.

"In a very small corner of it," Alieta answered, smiling. "Who is there here to concern themselves about my doings? . . . The station master's wife, and possibly the night clerk; the people at the farm yonder, and one or two Durban tradespeople who may happen to be staying at the hotel. . . . I don't think I need worry myself much about any of those."

"Harold won't like it," Mrs. Van der Vyver said.

Alieta bit her lip. This was an unanswerable argument: she was very well assured that Harold would strongly disapprove.

"No," she said.

"Don't you think you ought to consider his wishes?"

"No," Alieta said again, and frowned impatiently. "If there were any good reason for objection on his part it would be different. He simply dislikes Mr. Gommet."

"He dislikes Mr. Heckraft more," returned her

mother. "When he hears of this he will be very angry."

"I shall not tell him," Alieta replied quietly, and thereby, Mrs. Van der Vyver felt, imposed silence upon her as well.

"I don't like it," she exclaimed irritably, realising that she had exhausted all her arguments and had failed in achieving her purpose in coming. "If Katje were a white woman it wouldn't seem so extraordinary; but a Kaffir doesn't count."

"Then stay yourself," said Alieta, tired of the controversy, "and I will go home. But plainly one of us must be here."

Mrs. Van der Vyver threw out her hands in a gesture of despair.

"You are outrageous," she exclaimed. "Never since I went to Odsani a bride have I slept beneath another roof. . . ."

And Alieta knew that she had effectually silenced her mother's protests, but with the realisation of victory came a sense, not of triumph, but of weariness. She was strangely disheartened, not so much by the opposition she had met with, as by the disquieting ideas which Mrs. Van der Vyver had instilled in her mind. Was she, she asked herself dispiritedly, influenced by any other motive than that of disinterested kindness in doing this simple service for a neighbour in his need? . . .

She was aware that she had acted in the first instance upon a generous impulse, but the reasons which moved her to persist in defying her mother's wishes and public opinion were more complex, and therefore possibly less disingenuous. It was a sign of moral degeneracy that she dared not be perfectly frank with herself.

XVII

HECKRAFT dined with Alieta, waited on by Mambersad whom Gommet and he jokingly dubbed the Butler. Mambersad possessed large soft eyes like a girl's, and slim delicate hands. He was vain, and his vanity expressed itself in the silver bangles with which he adorned his dark wrists. A white turban covered his black silky hair, and blue and white cotton knickers, and a tunic of the same, completed his attire. Alieta took Mambersad seriously; and he waited upon her with the assiduous deference the Indian shows to the women of a superior race, a deference which in Africa certainly is largely superficial.

During the meal Heckraft was quietly observant of Alieta. He had never sat at table with her before, and it surprised him that it should seem so altogether natural. He had sometimes tried to picture Alieta at the head of his table in the capacity of wife and daily companion; now, realising one part of his dream, having her there in the flesh if not in the relationship he desired, he found it wonderfully pleasant and homelike. If the dream would only last, if there need be no awakening, how good it would be! . . .

And the best moment of that altogether enjoyable meal was when Mambersad placed the coffee on the table and withdrew, closing the door softly behind him, leaving them in an intimate solitude that feared no interruption.

Alieta poured out the coffee.

"Sugar?" she asked, and passed Heckraft his cup.

"Smoke," she said. "I know you would like to, and I enjoy the smell."

He lighted a cigarette.

"I have a feeling," said Alieta, sipping her coffee while she returned his steady gaze with shy, elusive eyes, "that in my desire to be useful I have been a little—indiscreet. . . . Does it strike you like that?"

"No," he answered, and felt an absurd irritation against Mrs. Van der Vyver, whom he suspected of implanting conventional ideas in her daughter's mind.

"But it might appear so to others," Alieta persisted. She gazed at him with a strong appeal in her eyes as though desiring reassurance on the point she had raised. Heckraft felt a savage desire to strike anyone who could harbour so base an idea.

"Assuredly not," he returned with some eagerness. "It is a dear, womanly, human act, your coming. What on earth should I have done alone? . . . You are not thinking of deserting us, are you?"

"No," Alieta answered, and fidgeted with the lid of the little coffee pot, keeping her eyes lowered. "I'm not thinking of deserting. But—I want you to do something that will make things easier for me."

He leant his arms on the table, and brought his face nearer hers. Alieta did not look up, and he noted appreciatively as he watched her closely how the soft colour came and went in her cheeks.

"I'll do anything for you," he said earnestly.

She drew a little quick breath which might have betokened relief, or any other emotion.

"Then will you—do you mind getting a room at the hotel for the few days I am here?"

He smiled.

"Is that all? . . . Well, I suppose I'd need to do

that, in any case. We haven't any guest chamber. I've told Rudgubadi to prepare my room for you. I'm sorry we've nothing better to offer, but we are badly off for accommodation."

The blush in Alieta's cheeks deepened. She was vexed with herself for having preferred her request since after all it was unnecessary; but Heckraft, observing her embarrassment, fancied that he had not entirely understood.

"Would it suit you best," he asked, "if I took my meals at the hotel?"

"Oh, no!" Alieta looked up quickly. She was frankly distressed that he should make such a proposal. "I should be sorry if you did that."

"I should be sorrier," he answered, and added with a whimsical smile which helped to restore her composure, "You have no idea what the cooking is like. But I would put up with that if it would help at all."

"It wouldn't," Alieta said.

Heckraft rose from the table reluctantly. He was too busy to linger over the coffee, much as he would have liked to; but there was a lot to attend to with Gommet's work as well as his own on his shoulders.

"I suppose I shall have to write to Durban and inform Mr. Johnson of what has happened," he remarked.

Alieta looked up sharply.

"Do you think that necessary?" she asked, unable to conceal altogether her dislike of this suggestion.

"Well ——," he said, and looked at her doubtfully, catching vaguely the reflex of her dislike for doing what he felt in the circumstances he ought to do. "I don't know. . . . What do you think?"

"I think," Alieta said slowly, "if you can manage single-handed, it would perhaps be advisable—not to be in any haste. The fewer people who know of this,

the better. It isn't as though it were really serious. Mr. Gommet will be up and about again before long."

This unlooked for objection on her part gave Heckraft food for thought. It was plain that she did not want Harold Johnson to hear of the accident, and the inference, as Heckraft read it, was that she had no desire for him to come up. He felt extraordinarily pleased at this, and being in the humour to catch at anything that conveyed the smallest encouragement of his rapidly growing hopes, he put an entirely wrong construction on her objection.

"I can manage all right," he said. "And after all, as you say, why should anyone beside ourselves and the doctor know the cause of Gommet's indisposition? I'll wait, as you suggest. If there should be any reason to write later. . . . Well, it can always be done."

Heckraft went to his work in an exalted frame of mind. He felt that he and Alieta shared a secret. Whether he was right or wrong in yielding to her wish to suppress the news of Gommet's disablement troubled him not at all. It was her wish, that was sufficient for him. That the wish fell in with his own views added to his pleasure, if not to his intention to accede to it. He knew that anything Alieta asked of him, even if distasteful to himself, he would do. Her desires were his laws.

When he came in at the tea hour Alieta was in the sick-room. He waited for her to join him, feeling an odd reluctance to sit down to table alone. Mambersad brought in the tea, and placed a savoury omelet, in the cooking of which Rudgubadi excelled, on the table, and gravely informed him of the fact that the food awaited his consumption. He answered briefly that he was not ready, and wandered out to the stoep to wait.

The doctor drove up while he was there, and went in to see the patient. Heckraft hung about to receive his report. He wanted to caution him against divulging the truth concerning Gommet's illness, his object being to keep the affair as quiet as possible.

The doctor was some time in the sick-room. When he came out Alieta followed him, and remained talking with him for several minutes in the living-room. Heckraft moved so that he should not appear to intrude at the interview; and presently the doctor came out to him on the stoep.

"How's the patient?" Heckraft asked him.

"Quite as well as I expected," was the answer. "His temperature has run up, but that is a development one is prepared for. Poor chap! he seems to have something on his mind. I'm hoping that later he will confide in Miss Van der Vyver. That girl is a brick. Not one woman in a hundred would do what she is doing. . . . By the way, I forgot to attend to your hand this morning. Shall I have a look at it now?"

"Thanks; that's all right. Miss Van der Vyver bandaged it for me. I don't think there is any need to disturb it. It's only a cut." Heckraft thrust the bandaged hand out of sight. "We're not making a noise about Gommet's accident," he added. . . . "He's down with a touch of fever, if anyone feels curious."

Doctor Seely looked closely at the speaker.

"It is just possible that people will feel more curiosity on Miss Van der Vyver's account than on Gommet's," he said.

"Why?" Heckraft demanded curtly.

The other was slow in replying.

"I've known Miss Van der Vyver for a good many years," he said at length, "therefore her present action seems perfectly natural to me. And I daresay, though

you haven't known her so long, you have become sufficiently intimate to realise that this is the practical form her kindness would be likely to take. But there are those who don't know her so well, and when they find she is staying in this house they will want some sort of an explanation. Do you think that a touch of fever adequately explains the case?"

"Well, I don't know. . . . I never thought of it like that," Heckraft admitted after reflection.

"I think," the doctor observed, "that in fairness to Miss Van der Vyver we will be obliged to allow the accident at least. But we will keep it as quiet as possible The affair is likely to excite a purely local interest."

"It's to be regretted that it's such a damned uncharitable world," Heckraft grumbled.

Doctor Seely laughed.

"We can't alter human nature, I'm afraid," he said. "Another flood might do it. . . . But then again, there'd have to be another Noah and his family to start things going, so the old prejudices would still exist. A world free from scandal would need to be sexless; existing evils appear to me preferable. But then I'm sufficiently conservative to be satisfied with things as they are."

Heckraft remained on the stoep after the motor had driven off, lost in thought. Alieta's own words to him earlier in the day, her anxiety to learn how her conduct impressed him, as much as what the doctor had said on the same subject, gave him food for reflection. It occurred to him that the surest way to settle this difficulty was to persuade her to become engaged to himself, and to marry him at an early date. The arrangement with Johnson, he believed, had never been made public, therefore the announcement of their engagement would create no great stir.

He resolved to set all scruples aside, and speak frankly to her; in the circumstances delay only increased the difficulties of a situation which his knowledge of the world forced him to admit was open to misconstruction. The point in the argument which he missed was that an engagement between Alieta and himself would complicate rather than simplify matters. In his reasoning Heckraft trained his mind to work in accordance with his inclination. It is a common enough practice, and often, as in this case, quite unwitting.

He was roused eventually from his reverie by Alieta summoning him to tea. She came to the window and called him.

"Why didn't you have your tea sooner?" she asked. . . . "Everything is spoilt."

"I wasn't hungry," he answered, and bearing in mind his recent resolutions, added boldly: "I preferred to wait until you could join me."

"Oh! but you mustn't do that," she said. "I shan't always be free to come to meals at the right time. Katje will wait on me. You must not let my being here upset the household arrangements."

"There's nobody to study," he answered.

"And what about your work?" she asked, smiling.

"That's finished for the day," he replied easily. "Come now, you would not force me to sup alone when there is nothing to call for haste?"

Alieta bent over the lamp, which had been turned too high, and lowered the wick before speaking.

"Rudgubadi will take offence if you neglect her culinary efforts," she said.

"Rudgubadi never bothers her head about anyone except Gommet," he answered, and could have bitten out his tongue the next minute for the indiscretion of his speech. But Alieta had not heard the

scandal with which Heckraft's mind had been poisoned, and she took his words in the sense in which he had uttered them.

"That's the Indian characteristic," she said, "faithfulness to one person's interests. . . . All the same, she'll resent it if you let her omelets get cold. And tea which has been standing for an hour isn't wholesome to drink."

"We'll soon remedy that," he said, and rang the bell for a fresh supply.

When the tea pot had been replenished, and the cold omelet succeeded by another newly cooked, they sat down. Alieta was frankly hungry, but Heckraft with his mind intent upon her, and his thoughts for ever working round the problem of how to approach her without outraging her feelings, made but an indifferent meal. He was so engaged in watching Alieta that he forgot to eat. He watched her white hands moving among the tea things, and was incensed at the sparkle of the diamonds on her finger, reminding him of the tie which bound her and which he proposed to break. He watched the glint of the lamplight on the brightness of her hair; it touched the loose curls on her temples and turned them to pale gold. And he watched the long white curve of her throat and hungered to kiss it, the slender, swan-like throat that gave such a proud poise to the small head.

He debated within himself whether he should speak to her that evening. . . .

But his courage faltered while he watched her and tried to frame some coherent sentences in his mind that would lead up to a declaration of his love. Viewed in the light of his very uncertain future, a proposal of marriage to a woman already, and highly advantageously, engaged, appeared an act of amazing im-

pertinence. The longer he considered it the more outrageous it seemed. . . .

And yet, he reasoned, it would be ridiculous to lose a chance of happiness if the chance were his for the asking.

Alieta looked up suddenly and surprised him watching her with the new, intent look in his eyes which she had not seen in them before. She was startled. It seemed to her that a hand was being laid upon her heart, a hand that was ruthlessly tearing aside its reservations and discovering its secrets. She felt profoundly disquieted; nor was she reassured by the easy flow of commonplace into which Heckraft plunged forthwith. For the second time that day her being had been stirred to its depths by the near presence of this man. That was all her mind could take in at the moment, and it troubled her.

XVIII

ALIETA had been playing with fire and she burnt her fingers, as many people do, before finding out that it is not a wise proceeding. Most practices with an element of danger in them appeal strongly to human nature, and even when the danger becomes apparent it is not easy to forego the excitement from reasons of discretion alone. The best of women is a coquette at heart no less than her inferior sisters, and in cases where the coquetry is unsuspected it becomes, as is inevitable where weakness is concealed from the knowledge of its possessor, an active peril.

Alieta had fallen in love with Anthony Heckraft. She knew it, though the revelation had only come to her when she held his cut and bleeding hand in hers and felt through her whole being the thrill of emotional excitement which moved her at the contact. She believed that he suspected it. Something which she had read in his eyes when she had surprised them fixed on her across the space of the tea-table had warned her that her secret was in danger of being discovered by the last person on earth she would have chosen to learn the truth. What she did not know was that Heckraft loved her. She believed that in playing with fire she ran the risk of burning herself only; that he was in danger of getting hurt, badly hurt, never occurred to her. He had always seemed to her so aloof even in his friendship. Un-

accustomed to look beneath the surface for motives of conduct which her more primitive upbringing failed to suggest, it had not struck her that the knowledge of her engagement to Johnson was a sufficient reason to account for this diffidence in a man of Heckraft's type. Alieta was unversed in the more conventional type of man; the people with whom she came mostly in contact, with the exception of Harold, were simple souls who worked hard and lived prudently and usually married for expediency when it was convenient to do so. The ordering of one's conduct by certain rules prescribed by convention was a proceeding she had no knowledge of. Her life hitherto had followed along simpler lines.

The new self-consciousness that was born in Alieta of these reflections caused her to avoid Heckraft persistently. Katje brought her meals to her in the room that had been his, and, save when she was resting, she did not leave the sick-room.

Mrs. Van der Vyver called during the morning and stayed for an hour, more, Alieta felt, for the sake of appearances, though there was no one to see her, than from any inclination to waste her morning in talk. She pressed for a definite statement as to when Alieta would return home, and, despite her objections, forced her way into the invalid's room to see if he was not well enough to dispense with nursing. Gommet, in his knowledge of Mrs. Van der Vyver's talking powers, shammed sleep, and Alieta, who knew that he was shamming, felt inwardly amused, while Mrs. Van der Vyver, dissatisfied but impressed none the less at sight of the white face on the pillow in its collar of bandages, backed out of the bedroom and took her departure, leaving Alieta as on the former occasion mistress of the situation.

Gommet had passed a fair night and was going on

well. He gave surprisingly little trouble, and it was evident from his docility and the manner in which he obeyed his nurse that he appreciated her kindness. When he was not sleeping he lay and watched her with a hungry affection and pain in his eyes that made her heart ache. If only she could have brought his wife to his bedside so that she might see that look in his eyes, she felt she would surely be touched, even to the point of forgiving all that had happened in the past to kill her love for him. As soon as he was well enough to speak on the subject, Alieta determined to ask him for his wife's address.

In the afternoon Heckraft also paid a short visit to the sickroom. It was the only occasion he had of seeing Alieta that day, and it was a very brief interview at that. He felt unreasonably annoyed with her for keeping away from the living-room. She was over-playing the rôle of nurse; and there was no credit in her absenting herself from meals since no one save themselves could know of the prudence of her conduct, nor, had they been wiser, were outsiders likely to be impressed by her discretion. She was merely punishing him. In his chagrin he called her a prude while knowing that the term was inapplicable. Whatever her reason might be for avoiding him it was assuredly not prompted by prudery.

He left early for the hotel, and spent the evening playing bridge with the manager and a couple of men up from Durban for the week-end, determined in his pique, since she made it so very evident that she did not desire his company, to keep out of her way.

But the morning found his anger against her melted; a hungry longing for her presence submerged every other emotion. He reasoned that since the woman he desired to see was living beneath the same roof it was absurd to suppose she could successfully

evade him for long. He decided to exercise patience. His turn would come. If she persistently refused to join him at meals he would write and ask her to give him an audience.

But there was no need for him to make his appeal in writing. It was Alieta who moved first, and her move was so unexpected, yet so entirely characteristic in its frank impulsiveness, that it disconcerted as greatly as it pleased him. In the end it precipitated matters.

Heckraft had finished work for the day, and was shutting the side lights of the sheds, which the Coolies had omitted to see to, before going across to the house. There were six large lights on either side of the building. He was closing them from the outside, and had his back to the road so that he did not see Alieta leave the house and cross the road and come towards him. He was unaware of her presence until she was close beside him, when he looked round with a start, and, unprepared for seeing her, was conscious that he changed colour.

"These fanlights are awkward for you with your maimed hand," she said, and took hold of the heavy frame with him and helped him to lower it.

"That was a kind thought of yours," he returned, and added with a mendacious and deliberate appeal for sympathy: "The hand inconveniences me more than I expected."

"Has the doctor seen it?" she inquired.

"No."

"But why? . . . I told you to let him attend to it. You may do mischief by neglecting it."

He looked at her strangely.

"The neglect is on your side," he answered. "I informed you no one else should touch it."

Alieta flushed swiftly, and then looked faintly amused.

"We will shut these windows," was all she said.

"Practical!" he commented, and smiled also. "So we will."

They closed all the lights on the one side and then went round to the other. When these also were lowered Heckraft insisted on the necessity for fastening them from inside the building. Alieta elected to remain without, believing that he could manage unaided; but he turned at the door and called her.

"Miss Van der Vyver," he said, with a hint at reproach in his voice, "I am afraid I must trouble you further."

Alieta entered the building. It was filled with a dusky twilight out of which Heckraft's figure loomed dim and uncertain against a background of lumber, and stacked poles, and piles of smaller timber. She stepped over the litter of bark on the floor and joined him. It was obvious to her that he had called her in for another purpose than that which he had stated; there was no reaching the lights from inside because of the timber which lined the walls. He made no pretence of attempting to fasten them, nor did he make any other demand on her aid. He stood quite still facing her, with his left hand resting lightly on the poles beside which they stood.

"Why do you persistently avoid me?" he asked with a suddenness for which Alieta was unprepared. But if she felt taken aback she did not betray it. She looked at him steadily.

"Did you bring me in here to ask that?" she said.

"I brought you in here because of it," he returned. "It is the only chance I have of speaking with you."

She lowered her eyes.

"I was under the impression that I came to nurse Mr. Gommet," she said.

"Is there any reason in that which prevents your being ordinarily friendly towards me?" he demanded.

He took up a piece of wood, weighed it for a second or so on his palm, and then put it down.

"Why, because you are nursing Gommet, am I condemned to eat in solitude, and otherwise be treated as though I didn't exist? . . . I might get blood poisoning in this hand for all the thought you've given it."

He paused, but she made no response to his complaint. She had given the wounded hand plenty of thought, had longed to, but feared to treat it; and she loved to hear him grumble at her seeming neglect.

"You've not a word, you see, to say in self-justification," he went on. "You are conscious of having treated me in a very shabby fashion. And you don't allow even that you're sorry. . . . I'm not a patient man by any means, and I consider that I have been sufficiently long suffering. . . . I wish to draw your attention to the fact, Miss Van der Vyver, that I stand between you and the door."

Alieta looked up. A faint smile curved the red lips and lurked in the depths of her eyes. Heckraft, despite the light banter of his words, looked serious enough. He felt, though Alieta was far from suspecting it, decidedly and increasingly nervous.

"I see that," Alieta answered. She hesitated, and the smile at the corners of her mouth widened. "I am quite satisfied that that fact imposes no restraint on my liberty."

He shook his head.

"You are a wise woman," he remarked; "you have learnt that danger and fear seldom exist apart, and fear you don't possess. At the same time, I would

point out that though your liberty may not be threatened, our positions give me the advantage. You cannot close this interview with your customary inconsiderate haste without taking me by the two shoulders and moving me out of your path. . . . I have something to say to you, and since you give me so few opportunities I propose to make the most of this. . . . That isn't generous,—is it?" he added, scrutinising closely her blushing, downcast face. "But—what am I to do?"

He took one of her hands as it hung loosely at her side, and held it in a close firm clasp.

"Dear, I know that I ought not to say what I'm going to say. . . . I've weighed all there is for and against it so often in my mind that I know exactly how it will appear to an outsider,—how it must appear to you. . . . I ought not to tell you—but I must tell you. . . . I'm breaking all the rules of the game, but—I love you. That's my sole justification. I'm a poor man, dear, and my prospects are not particularly rosy, and I've got the consummate cheek to ask you to throw up everything in order to follow my poor fortunes. . . . Alieta, will you marry me?—just because I love you so—my dear!"

Alieta raised wide startled eyes to his. She did not withdraw her hand; it lay cold and inert in his warm grip; her face in the dim light looked white and tragic. His own face was tense too, and he shook from head to foot with emotion as a man might shake from cold. He was prepared in a sense for her answer; he anticipated it; not for one moment had he imagined that he could win out of hand; but if he could only wring an admission from her that she loved him in return, he would be satisfied and be prepared to fight.

"I can't," she answered, and stared at him dully. "I

thought you knew. . . . I'm engaged to Harold Johnson."

"Oh, Lord!" he said.

He dropped her hand and half turned away.

"But you knew," Alieta persisted.

"Of course I knew. . . . Haven't I been admitting it? . . . If it hadn't been for that I'd have told you what I've just told you months ago."

"I'm sorry," Alieta said simply. "I never supposed you cared. . . . I—I didn't think I was doing you any harm."

"You are not," he returned gravely. "The mere fact of loving you is good in itself. If you had been married when I met you I should have loved you just the same, and never regretted loving you; the only difference is I shouldn't have told you."

"But I am as good as married," Alieta said.

"Are you?"

He took a step nearer and looked her straight in the eyes.

"That's what I'm bent on finding out," he said. "If you love the man you are engaged to as a wife should love her husband, you'll hear no more from me. If you don't love him with your whole heart, if you think the day may come when you will regret your choice, then pause now, and give him, as well as me, the benefit of your doubt . . . Alieta," he took her by the shoulders and held her firmly, his earnest gaze compelling her reluctant eyes to meet his, "there is one tragedy greater than missing love entirely, and that is a mistaken marriage. . . . I wouldn't have you suffer that."

Alieta's eyes looked back into his, dark with pain and yearning, and deep with conflicting thoughts and emotions that warred incessantly in her breast. Perhaps he hurried her too much. He would have been

wiser had he given her time to think,—opportunity to battle with her scruples and readjust her sense of right. At the moment she could only feel that the offer of love which this man was making was wrong in the circumstances, that to listen to him was an act of disloyalty on her part to the man whose ring she wore.

"I am not the only person to be considered," she said. "You wouldn't have me think simply of myself?"

"No," he answered. "But I would wish you to remember that your happiness is as important as another's—more important in my opinion."

"I am bound in honour to Harold," she said slowly after a pause.

He bit his lip.

"That isn't the question," he insisted. "Forgive me . . . . but, having gone so far, I must know the truth. . . . Do you love him?"

For the fraction of a moment Alieta hesitated. Then her eyes fell before his.

"Yes—I love him," she faltered.

Heckraft removed his hands from her shoulders.

"Pardon my blundering, and my presumption," he said,—"and forget if you can, what I have said."

He moved aside, and Alieta with a little catch of her breath, which was not a sob but was caused by excessive emotion, hurried past him, and sped swiftly out of the place.

An hour later, though he was not aware how long he remained after she left him, Heckraft emerged from the darkened building, and shutting the door behind him, crossed the road and entered the house.

XIX

PATIENTLY Mambersad waited at the baas' elbow with his soft, gazelle-like eyes intent on the grave, preoccupied face. Three times he had uncovered the savoury steaming dish in front of Heckraft, and as many times replaced the cover for fear that the mess should cool before the baas condescended to help himself.

Mambersad was a Natal born Indian, and used the colonial form of address in place of the sahib of his country. As a matter of fact, most Indians, Madras or Calcutta boys, adopt the familiar word "baas" after a brief residence in the country; it is a more generally accepted style of address.

It was a strange supper-table, had anyone been there to look upon the scene. The man seated at the head of it, motionless, making no pretence at eating, his strong thoughtful face set and abstracted, his bandaged hand resting on the table-cloth beside his empty plate, and the small immovable figure beside him that might have been a bronze statue but for the occasional flicker of the black lashes which partially veiled the speaking eyes, and the quite automatic, tentative movement with which at stated intervals the thin brown hand was advanced to uncover, and again to recover, the dish in front of Heckraft's plate.

Eventually Heckraft roused himself, and immediately Mambersad became swiftly and silently active. He uncovered the dish for the fourth time, and Heck-

raft helped himself mechanically from force of habit, and began to eat. Nature asserts herself, even in the case of a man in love and badly disappointed. Heckraft satisfied his hunger, and then rose from the table and lighted his pipe.

"Shut the window," he said irritably.

Mambersad obeyed. It was still early in the season, and when the sun set the nights came in cold. He looked at the logs in the grate, and then inquiringly at Heckraft.

"Will the baas have a fire?" he asked.

"No."

Heckraft bethought himself that he would be leaving shortly for the hotel. Then he remembered Alieta. It was possible that Alieta would sit in the room when he was gone.

"Yes; light it," he said.

Mambersad squatted on his heels and held a match to the chippings of wood with which the fire was laid; he blew it into flames with his mouth; and Heckraft, sensible of the warmth and comfort, drew a chair up before the hearth and sat down. Mambersad brought in coffee which he placed on a small table and set at the baas' elbow. Then he withdrew, and the man was left alone, staring into the leaping flames as they curled round the dried wood and shot upwards, long crimson tongues darting forth like the tongue of a serpent which licks the dust.

"I believe," he said musingly, watching a red fork of flame that darted out at him between the bars, "I believe I am going to take this badly."

He sat forward with his hands clasped between his knees. His pipe, which he had not attempted to smoke, had gone out; it lay unheeded upon the table beside the untouched cup of coffee. Never in his life before had Anthony Heckraft felt so completely

stranded,—without place, without hope, without ambition,—utterly adrift on the voyage of life,—alone in the world, and unwanted.

"If I don't do something," he mused, still staring at the fire as though the dancing flames could furnish him with a suggestion by the example of their own activity, "I shall make a fool of myself. But what is there to do? . . . Oh damn! . . ."

He sat for a long while lost in thought. So abstracted was he, so unconscious of the progress of time, that when Mambersad entered to remove his coffee cup he looked up resentfully and rebuked him for his haste.

Heckraft put out a hand for his coffee when the boy retired, and found that it was cold. The fire was getting low. He flung on fresh logs, looked at his watch, and rose.

"Overstayed my time," he muttered. "She'll think that's done purposely."

As though in answer to his thought the door opened and Alieta entered. She looked tired, he decided, otherwise there was nothing in her appearance or manner to recall the stress of the recent interview. That she was prepared to see him was evident; she had not entered under the impression that he had left. She had nevertheless, he observed, some difficulty in meeting his eyes.

"A fire!" she said, looking past him at the glowing logs in the grate. "How comfortable that looks!"

"It feels comfortable too," he answered easily. "Sit here and try it. I'm just off."

"I want before you go," she said, "to dress the hand."

"Oh, that!" He put it behind him out of sight. "It really isn't necessary to trouble you. The hand is practically well."

"You complained," she reminded him gravely, "of its inconveniencing you."

He smiled.

"I'm afraid I was making a bid for sympathy. My flesh has an annoying habit of healing at once. I remember as a small boy keeping a cut open in order to escape doing sums."

Alieta, to his complete satisfaction, laughed. Her amusement lessened the strain both were conscious existed until that little spontaneous laugh snapped the tension.

"I should have considered the hurt more of a punishment than the sums," she said.

"It was," he answered. "I was caught at the dodge and licked for malingering. The chastisement, you see, wasn't efficacious in curing me altogether."

"I'm inclined to encourage you," she returned. "I should like, if you don't mind, just to see the hand. It would be a satisfaction to me to judge for myself how it was going on."

"Since you put it that way," he answered, "of course I don't mind. But remember, I've admitted that it's practically healed, so you can't blame me, when you see it, for giving you unnecessary trouble."

"That youthful experience wasn't altogether without its effect," Alieta replied, smiling.

Heckraft smiled with her.

"No," he said. "It has left me with a strong sympathy for all malingerers. It is so good to be able to shirk one's responsibilities and receive sympathy at the same time. . . . Shall I ring the bell for the Butler?"

"I can fetch all I require," she answered, and left the room to fetch the dressing which she had put in readiness when, the doctor having paid his visit before Heckraft returned to the house, she had realised

that unless she attended to his hand it would go uncared for.

When she returned Heckraft was standing by the table busily unwinding the bandage from the wounded hand.

"There!" he remarked, displaying it. "Did I boast when I told you how abominably healthy I am? It only requires time, you see, and keeping clean."

Alieta took the hand in hers. Heckraft set his teeth as she bent over it and touched it so gently with her fingers that they seemed to caress him. She was inflicting a refinement of torture so little endurable in the present condition of affairs that it made a tremendous demand on his fortitude to suffer her touch without losing command of his feelings. Was she deliberately playing with him, he wondered, that in face of what he had so recently told her she could behave as though nothing unusual had happened between them?

"Yes, it's healing quite nicely," she said, in a low, level voice. "Nature is kind to you,—she can do more for you than I. . . . I'll put on a fresh dressing which will make it more comfortable."

She released the hand to prepare the dressing. Heckraft watched in silence while she spread some new lint with ointment. When it was ready he advanced his hand mechanically, and she applied the lint.

"I think," she remarked slowly, as she deftly wound on a fresh bandage, "that probably there will be a scar."

"Yes," he agreed; "there will be a scar."

Something in the manner of his admission brought the distressed crimson to Alieta's face. She bent her head lower over her work to hide if possible the tears that welled in her eyes. If that day was to sear its mark upon him, it was likely to leave its impression

upon her also. Blinded with tears she could scarcely see to stitch the bandage in place. The needle, ready threaded, was stuck in the front of her dress. She felt for it with trembling fingers that fumblingly fulfilled their task. Then she bent her face nearer and snapped the thread, as she had done on a former occasion, with her teeth. Was it his imagination, he wondered, or did she in reality press her lips to his wrist?

She turned away abruptly, and began gathering together the things she had brought with her.

"Thank you," he said. "I—am glad you did it after all. . . . You see, I stood in need of a little sympathy."

Aware of her emotion, he had turned his back to her, and was staring down into the fire. She glanced towards him swiftly. There was that in the droop of his head and shoulders that conveyed an air of dejection which it hurt her to observe. Alieta recognised instinctively that he was the type of man who neither loves lightly nor suffers disappointment easily. She was conscious of feeling intensely sorry for him, and wished, without knowing how, to give some expression to her sorrow.

"One feels diffident about offering sympathy to the strong," she observed.

"You need not be," he said. He faced round slowly, and looked at her. "I'm beginning to think that I'm rather weak in some respects. I want your sympathy badly. . . ." He smiled faintly. "I'm feeling round, you observe, after the crumbs. . . .

"It sounds a little bald," he added jerkily, filling a pause, "after what has so recently passed, to ask you to accept my sincere friendship. Yet, had you been a married woman when I met you, I should have made that demand."

Alieta advanced deliberately, and joined him where he stood upon the hearth. She lifted her candid, fearless eyes to his.

"But of course," she said, "we can be friends. . . . We are friends."

"Thank you," he answered. He took her hand, and held it for a while in his. "I don't want you to imagine that there is more in the offer than appears on the surface. All that's finished with. You have nothing to fear from me."

"I am sure of it," she replied quietly.

Some impulse within her fought with her outward control and tempted her to tell him that had he come into her life sooner things would have been different, but her natural womanly reserve came to her aid in this crisis, and all she said in expression of the tumult of feeling was,—

"I consider myself fortunate in having won your regard."

He loosed her hand.

"And I reckon myself fortunate in that my path has been privileged to cross yours," he returned. "It is the parting of the ways now, and that is always painful. Later, perhaps, I shall be able to look back on this episode without regret, and realise the advantage of your friendship. When you are married we shall come little in contact."

"There is no immediate prospect of my marriage," she said, and sighed unconsciously. "Many obstacles stand in the way."

"Yes!" he said.

His thoughts reverted to the interview he had had with Johnson senior, at which the latter had plainly given him to understand that the marriage would not have his sanction.

"Love will sweep those obstacles aside," he added confidently.

Alieta looked at him uncertainly. He had but given expression to her own convictions on the subject, but loyalty to her lover urged her to offer a protest in his defence.

"Some obstacles are not so easily surmounted," she returned.

"Well, of course," he agreed. "I am arguing in ignorance of the circumstances, always an unwise proceeding. Whatever the obstacles may be, I trust that they will not stand between you and your happiness long. . . . I don't suppose there is any way in which I can help. If there is, I hope you will not hesitate to command me. It could only be a pleasure to me to serve you at any time. . . . And now," he said, forcing himself to a lighter mood, "I will cut across to the hotel. But before going I should like to look in on Gommet."

He went to the door, and then came swiftly back and stood again facing her upon the hearth.

"It would be absurd for me to go without telling you," he muttered unsteadily, "that if ever you change your mind, one word—aye, a look even—will bring me back to your side."

Then he wheeled about abruptly and left her, and Alieta remained for a long while after he was gone gazing down, as he had gazed, into the leaping flames of the wood fire with blurred, unseeing eyes.

XX

THE fog hung heavy in the valley. The morning sun which usually dispelled the mists was hiding sulkily behind the clouds; tentatively at intervals it shot forth a searching gleam, and then withdrew again as though discouraged by the density of the vapour which hid the hills. The air was keen and crisp for the time of year, for winter lay behind.

Along the steep road from the station a motor travelled rapidly. It swung round the bend and past the sheds. The driver kept a lookout as he passed the works as though prepared, in the event of seeing anyone, to stop the car. But the man who was usually to be found there at that hour of the day was ill in bed, and Heckraft was riding on the land. Johnson knew nothing of Gommet's indisposition. He flashed past the sheds, and was flashing past the engineer's house, when the sight of a woman's figure at the window of the sitting-room caught his attention.

"By Jove!" he said.

He did not recognise it for Alieta's. The glimpse he had caught had not been sufficient to assure him of more than that it was a woman's figure, and European at that. He slowed down, scarcely conscious that he was stopping the car, the action was so instinctive and unpremeditated.

The woman opened the window and stepped out upon the stoep. Johnson's amazement on perceiving

that it was not Mrs. Gommet, as he had imagined, but Alieta, changed in quality; it did not increase—there had been no room for increase in his first astonishment—but it gained in indignant incredulity.

"You!" he almost shouted. "What in hell are you doing here?"

She came out into the road and stood beside the car.

"I wish," she said quietly, "that you would not allow your feelings to get the better of you."

He stared at her in angry astonishment.

"My God!" he said. "You take things coolly."

"It would be better if you learnt to take things with less heat," she observed.

"Do you know what the hour is? . . . And it's Monday," he sputtered.—"When did you get here?"

"I have been here some days," she replied.

"But why? . . . Who's with you?" he demanded in a breath.

"Only Katje." She smiled suddenly. "I suppose it may appear monstrous—to you. It is a little unusual. . . . I am nursing Mr. Gommet."

"*You!*—nursing Gommet! . . . What's the matter with him?"

He opened the door of the car, and stood in the road beside her. Alieta regarded him with an exasperating air of indifference. He was not to know that the outward calm masked a tumult of emotion. She was feeling not only nervous, but horribly shy.

"Come with me to the house," she said, "and I will tell you. It is cold out here in the fog."

He dragged off his overcoat and put it round her shoulders, not tenderly, but as a man might suddenly recalled to a neglected duty. They walked back in silence. Alieta led the way to the sitting-room, and closed the door behind them. Johnson took up a posi-

tion near the window, and stood regarding her with the aggrieved manner of a sulky schoolboy. He would have enjoyed to flare out in righteous passion, but was conscious that he occupied the disadvantageous position of being more keen on their engagement than she was.

"Well?" he said shortly.

Alieta stood by the table, one hand resting upon it. Her eyes evaded his. The fact that she had a difficulty in meeting his gaze gave him greater confidence, it seemed to reverse their positions, and put him for the time in the right.

"Well?" he repeated, and was conscious of the condescension of his manner. He was feeling magnanimous.

And then Alieta spoilt the harmony of things. She also was conscious of his condescension; and she smiled.

"It's all very fine for you to stand grinning there," he observed rudely; "but I'm waiting for an explanation of your extraordinary conduct."

Alieta began pushing the table-cloth into pleats with her finger.

"It is no use being angry, Harold," she said. "Mr. Gommet—hurt himself. There was no one else to nurse him, so I stayed."

"Hurt himself!—How?" he asked.

Alieta hesitated.

"I think he was shaving. Anyway, he cut himself badly with a razor."

"Oh!" he interjected scornfully. . . . "D. T.'s, I suppose, and attempted suicide. How the devil did you get to hear of it?"

"Mr. Heckraft told me. I met him on the road as he was riding for the doctor; so I came back here to see what I could do. I have been here ever since."

"Heckraft, of course!" he sneered. "He'd be glad to get you here on any pretext. . . . So that's the way you amuse yourself in my absence?"

"It hasn't been exactly funny," she replied.

"Why didn't Heckraft write to inform us of the accident?" he demanded.

"We hoped to keep it as quiet as possible," Alieta returned.

"That also was Heckraft's idea, I suppose?"

Alieta made no response. She did not feel equal to going deeper into that. Johnson looked savage.

"I'll see to it that he gets kicked out of this," he said. . . . "Officious bounder!"

Alieta reddened.

"As for you," he added, his anger against her suddenly kindling anew, "you'll get your hat, and come out of this now—at once. I won't allow my promised wife to play the part of chatelaine for any man."

"I'm in the rôle of nurse, not chatelaine," she answered so quietly that he was temporarily disarmed. But he still felt aggrieved.

"You're nursing Gommet," he said. "But what of Heckraft? . . . He isn't on the sick list too, I suppose?"

"Mr. Heckraft is quite well, I believe," she answered guardedly. "He is living at the hotel."

This was true. Heckraft, since his proposal to Alieta, had removed altogether to the hotel. She did not feel it incumbent upon her to explain that the removal was of very recent date.

"Why didn't you write and tell me?" he demanded, eyeing her with a suspicious scrutiny that brought the red blood to her cheeks.

"I didn't write," she answered, after a brief moment for thought, "because I felt that you wouldn't approve, and I didn't wish to have any unpleasantness.

You don't like Mr. Gommet. . . . If there had been any other way, beside getting a trained nurse for him, I would have taken it. But there was only me."

"It's his wife's business to nurse him," he answered sourly.

"Of course it is," Alieta agreed. "If I knew where she was, I would have sent for her."

"She wouldn't have come," he replied with sulky assurance.

Alieta regarded him gravely.

"Oh! I think if someone had gone to her and shown her the matter in its true light, she would have done at least that much for him," she said.

"Well, we can neither of us answer for Mrs. Gommet," he returned disagreeably. "And that's not the point. Are you coming away with me? . . . I'll send a nurse to him."

"I will only give up my place to his wife," she answered quietly, but with a firmness he was beginning to recognise he could never overrule with bullying. "If I knew where his wife was to be found I would go to her."

"She's in Maritzburg," he answered shortly.

Alieta looked surprised.

"Do you know her address?" she asked.

"Yes. . . . If you come with me now, I'll see to it that she hears about her husband," he said. "But I don't promise that she'll go to him."

"I'll go with you if you'll take me to her," she bargained.

He was unprepared for this, and manifestly disinclined to agree to the arrangement.

"Nonsense! You've nothing to do with them," he returned sharply. "You leave it to me. . . . I'll manage it."

But Alieta remained obdurate.

"When you have managed it I will leave with you," she replied. "But I must see Mrs. Gommet first."

Johnson swore under his breath. She reminded him of her mother in her inflexible determination. He could have struck her at the moment with immense satisfaction.

"I never met such an obstinate woman as you," he exclaimed, and added angrily: "Don't you trust me?"

"I don't trust her," she answered. "I want to see, and speak with her myself."

"Well,—hang it all!— you can do that after she is here."

Alieta went up to him, and put both hands on his arm, looking earnestly into his eyes.

"Harold," she said, "I understand my own sex better than you do. . . . I know that if I could see Mrs. Gommet I could make her understand too. . . . I want to see her. I mean to see her. I am not defying you as you think, for the sake of appearing unreasonable. . . . I am not enjoying it. But this duty has been thrust upon me, and shown to me so clearly that I cannot overlook it. I have got to see Mrs. Gommet. I have got to see this thing through. Will you take me to her?—or must I stay here until I find out her address for myself?"

She paused and looked at him for his answer. He reddened uncomfortably beneath her look. Then he shook himself free irritably from the clasp of her hands.

"You would leave me no choice," he said sourly. "This isn't a job for you. . . . leave it to me, I say."

"Will you take me?" she persisted.

He swung savagely round on his heel with a muttered imprecation.

"Oh! come on! I'll drive you there in the car. But only on the condition," he added roughly, "that you

hold as little communication with her as possible, and that you leave again with me afterwards."

"Yes; if I can persuade her to take my place, I will leave with you," she rejoined.

The task of persuading Mrs. Gommet was not altogether an easy one. Johnson whirled Alieta to Maritzburg in a very short space of time. Mrs. Gommet was staying at a large family hotel. Besides her bedroom, she had a private sitting-room. To anyone who knew how limited was the income with which Gommet was able to supply his wife, this fact alone would have been significant; but Alieta knew nothing of such matters; she accepted things as she found them.

Johnson left her to go inside alone while he waited in the quiet shady road with the car.

"Tell her," he said authoritatively, as she was leaving him, and his manner struck her as somewhat odd, "that she had jolly well better go back to him."

Alieta was shown into Mrs. Gommet's sitting-room. She waited for about five minutes, and then Mrs. Gommet entered. For many years Alieta had known this woman, known her for a shallow little frivolous person who enjoyed masculine admiration above and beyond everything; but even Alieta was taken aback at Mrs. Gommet's appearance. The once pretty bright hair had been dyed to a ruddy auburn, and her cheeks were unmistakably rouged. She wore a very up-to-date dress which revealed her figure in suggestive and, to Alieta's idea, unpleasant lines. Her surprise at seeing Alieta was very real.

"Miss Van der Vyver!" she cried shrilly. "Whatever brings you here? It's awfully good of you to come and see me in my loneliness," she added as an afterthought.

Alieta rose from her seat and faced this silly little

person who had all but wrecked the life of a man who, drunkard though he was, deserved a better fate.

"I have come," Alieta answered quietly, "on a very grave mission. Your husband is ill, Mrs. Gommet, and has need of you. I want you to go back with me."

Mrs. Gommet stared at her.

"Ill!" she repeated dully. "Not ——"

She paused. Alieta came in on the pause.

"He met with an accident," she said, "several days ago. I have been nursing him because there was no one else."

"An accident!" Mrs. Gommet's voice rose an octave. "He isn't,"—she said, and broke off again on the unfinished sentence.

"Why wasn't I told!" she asked.

"I did not know—no one knew," Alieta said gently, "where you were. As soon as I heard I came for you."

Mrs. Gommet looked at her strangely, and plucked at the curtains with nervous fingers.

"How did you hear?" she asked. . . . "Who told you?"

"Mr. Johnson. He brought me here in his car. He is waiting to take us back to Drummond. . . . Will you come?"

Mrs. Gommet stared at her. She moistened her dry lips with her tongue, looked from Alieta down into the road, and laughed hysterically.

"Mr. Johnson!" she repeated. "He brought you! . . ."

She looked at Alieta again.

"I can't go with you," she said. . . . "I can't. Go out and tell him that I say so." She turned on Alieta quite fiercely. "Tell him that I *won't*," she said.

"No," Alieta replied steadily, "I won't tell him that. . . . I'll wait. Presently you'll think differently. I will wait with you here until you consent to go home with me."

Mrs. Gommet looked at the speaker angrily. Alieta was so calm and dignified and beautiful that her anger suddenly melted; in its place a strange self-pity flooded her poor little hungry soul.

"Oh, you!" she cried. "It is easy for you."

And then she sat down suddenly and broke into bitter weeping.

XXI

ALIETA remained with Mrs. Gommet for the better part of an hour. At the end of that time, though she had convinced Mrs. Gommet that it was her duty to return to her husband, Mrs. Gommet had made it radically clear to her that she could not do so in Mr. Harold Johnson's car.

"I can't," she said, and reiterated the assertion many times. "I can't. . . . I should feel so ashamed. . . . Send him away. . . . I can't go back with him. . . . He can't mean that, really."

Feeling some sympathy with her reluctance, without understanding it, Alieta went out into the road to inform her waiting and increasingly impatient fiancé.

"You had better drive back," she said: "Mrs. Gommet is going with me by train."

He looked at her dubiously and chewed the ends of his fair mustache.

"Why can't she go alone?" he asked. He had not supposed that she would consent to go, and he had certainly never intended taking her back in his car.

"You couldn't expect that, Harold."

"Well, but I want to take you back with me. . . . You promised to come back with me." He looked away from her down through the vista of gum trees that lined the road on either side. "After all," he said half savagely, "I don't know that she's the right sort of companion for you."

Alieta regarded his flushed, rebellious face with a faint surprise.

"I couldn't leave her," she said. "You don't understand, Harold. . . . It's not easy for her."

"That's her lookout," he returned brutally.

"Well, but it's something that she has consented to go back."

"It's a sign of grace, you mean. . . . I don't know. . . . I'd think more of her in the circumstances if she left him alone." He swung round on her suddenly. "Look here!" he said. "Cut it, and come home with me. "I'm sorry now I brought you. I was a fool—a blithering ass. But you were so beastly importunate. Get in, Alieta. . . . You've done your part. Leave the rest to her."

But Alieta refused to leave her mission half fulfilled.

"I am going to take her to him," she answered firmly. "When I have done that, I will join you at Odsani."

And nothing he could urge would alter her determination.

Johnson drove off in a temper, and Alieta went back to Mrs. Gommet. Mrs. Gommet turned from the window as Alieta entered the room after her interview with Johnson: Alieta felt that she had been watching the scene from behind the curtain. Mrs. Gommet was openly curious, but guarded in her curiosity.

"What made him bring you here?" she asked.

"I did," Alieta answered.

The other woman stared.

"I wonder how you manage to make him do things against his will," she said.

"How do you know it was against his will?" Alieta inquired.

Mrs. Gommet emitted a short laugh.

"Well, it wasn't his suggestion, I expect," she said.

"It was his idea that you should be nursing your husband instead of me," Alieta returned.

Mrs. Gommet looked down, and fingered the loose ends of ribbon about her waist.

"I wonder," she began, and broke off and looked at Alieta again. . . . "What is he to you?" she asked suddenly.

Alieta was taken aback at the question.

"I'm engaged to marry him," she replied.

"Oh!" Slowly the warm colour crept into Mrs. Gommet's cheeks behind the rouge. She turned away, perhaps conscious of the tell-tale blush and reluctant that it should be seen. "I did not know that. . . . Since when?" she asked.

Alieta objected to the catechism.

"Oh! for some while," she answered, and added: "Whatever does it matter? We are not announcing it yet."

"A secret engagement!" Mrs. Gommet muttered softly. She stared at Alieta. "A secret engagement!" she repeated as softly. . . . "I didn't know."

Alieta felt suddenly angry.

"There is nothing clandestine about it," she said proudly. "My people know—and his."

Mrs. Gommet faced her squarely.

"He isn't good enough for you," she said dully. "If you marry him the day will dawn for you, as it dawned for me, when you will regret the step."

Alieta flushed. Mrs. Gommet was still scrutinising her, but pensively now, and a little wistfully.

"You are too good for him," she reiterated softly, and Alieta could not be quite sure, but it sounded to her as though Mrs. Gommet uttered the word "Brute!" between her clenched teeth.

"I'm sure I don't know," Alieta exclaimed with

spirit, "why you should say these things to me. I would rather you left my affairs alone."

"And yet you interfere in mine!"

The quiet tone in which this statement, which in its simple earnestness could scarcely have been styled a rebuke, was uttered hit Alieta's sense of fairness in its most vulnerable part. She hesitated, and looked at Mrs. Gommet almost apologetically.

"How can I help it?" she exclaimed. "What can I say to justify my interference? . . . I have been nursing him. . . . If you could have seen the pain,—the patient wistfulness of his eyes,—if you could have heard him, as I did, imploring the doctor to let him 'slip out of it,' you'd understand why I felt I must interfere."

"Did he ——" Mrs. Gommet's lips whitened—"did he try to commit suicide?" she whispered.

"Yes."

Alieta believed that the truth, brutal as it sounded, was best.

"Did he say anything—to explain why he attempted his own life?" Mrs. Gommet walked away again to the window and stood there with her back to the room. Her voice and her manner were exceedingly agitated. "He didn't—leave anything—a letter—about where anyone could read it?" she asked jerkily.

"No."

Mrs. Gommet heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"I'll go and put a few things together," she said. "If you'll wait here I shan't be long."

During the journey to Drummond Mrs. Gommet became more expansive, more frankly confidential. It was so long since any woman had spoken to her kindly, so long since she had had a sympathetic feminine ear into which to pour her confidences, that she probably said more than she would have done given

time to reflect. With Alieta's kindly attentive face opposite in the otherwise empty carriage, and Alieta's friendly eyes looking into hers, she unburdened somewhat her guiltily troubled mind.

"It was my letter, I expect," she said abruptly, apropos of nothing save the unspoken thought in both minds, "that made him do it."

"If you wrote him an unkind letter," Alieta returned soothingly, "you are doing your best to make up for it now."

Mrs. Gommet smiled, a wintry, doubtful smile.

"He mightn't have me back," she said.

Alieta surveyed her in silence. This view of the matter had not once presented itself to her. She felt suddenly inadequate. There was a long pause.

"You see," Mrs. Gommet said, breaking in on the silence, "I wrote to tell him I didn't want him to provide for me any longer because someone else was doing that."

She stared at Alieta's startled face with wide, apprehensive eyes. Then she began to cry. The friendly brown eyes opposite had darkened and become suddenly aloof in expression. She withdrew further into her corner of the compartment, and wept the rouge on her cheeks into streaks, sobbing softly, with her shoulders hunched up, like a disconsolate child.

"You needn't look like that," she wailed protestingly. "It wasn't altogether my fault. . . . And Joe never understood me. . . . And he drank. . . . You've never had to live with a man who drinks—whisky,—dop,—anything. . . . The smell of it was never out of him." She sobbed more energetically now, with increased self-pity. "If it hadn't been that I had nowhere to go, I couldn't have stood it as long as I did."

Alieta felt suddenly very compassionate towards this pathetic little lump of human misery.

"And yet you are going back to him!" she said, and sat appalled at this new difficulty. "How will you stand it now?"

"I don't know."

"Then why are you going back?" the girl asked blankly, abruptly made conscious that by her interference in the lives of these two human beings whom she knew only superficially she might be laying the foundation of a greater tragedy than anything that had occurred as yet. It is impossible for anyone to constitute himself a judge in human affairs.

"Because he said I must," Mrs. Gommet sobbed.

"Who said?"

"Mr. Johnson—and you." The tear-stained, woebegone face was lifted swiftly as the afterthought was jerked out in frightened, self-conscious haste. "You know you persuaded me," she cried, aggrieved and slightly reproachful. "You said I'd taken him for better and *worse,* that I was selfishly and lightly breaking my marriage vows because I found the bargain was not as good as I had expected. . . . You are right, in a way, because I did suspect beforehand,—only I wanted to be married. A woman ought not to go through with marriage unless she is quite sure. It is only easy to make allowances before you are married to the man."

Alieta leaned forward and laid a hand on Mrs. Gommet's knee.

"I ought not to have tried to persuade you," she said contritely. "I was wrong. I ought simply to have told you facts, and have left you to make your own decision."

"Oh! what does it matter," Mrs. Gommet said pettishly,—now? I'm going back, I suppose. . . . It

doesn't seem as though there was anything else for it."

She reflected for a while.

"Joe was at least kind," she mused. "He never knocked me about however hard he drank. If it hadn't been for the smell ——"

She broke off.

"If only people had left me *alone!*" she burst forth presently, and rolled her handkerchief into a hard little ball, and dabbed her eyes with it. "Men are such beasts," she said.

Alieta remained silent.

"And, oh God! those hills! . . . the loneliness of it! . . . And the scent of the wattles makes me sick."

The moan of discontent smote on Alieta's heart. Had not she also felt discontented with her life, been appalled with the loneliness of it? She gazed out through the open window at the beauty of the prospect, at the undulating country beneath the blue, sunlit sky, and the mists that were rapidly rolling away like a veil which had shrouded the beauty of the morning.

"Oh! I know," she said. "My dear, I know! . . . But it's nursing the discontent which shuts out the joy. We have got to learn to see the happiness which is ours."

"Happiness!" scoffed Mrs. Gommet, with the scorn of one who has never appreciated the beauty of quiet things, to whom joy means merely excitement, and pleasure the laudation of others. "What happiness, I should like to know, is there to be found in a hole like Drummond?"

And Alieta did not answer with the thought that was in her mind, that one should seek happiness, not in places, but in oneself.

"If we'd lived in a town," Mrs. Gommet said, "it would have been different. . . ."

It was rather a defiant, albeit distressed looking little woman who entered with Alieta the home she had left secretly five years before. It was by her wish that Alieta accompanied her.

"I'm scared," she said. . . . "And perhaps Joe will turn me out."

So Alieta went with her, and stayed in the sitting-room, her attention strained and very much on the alert, while Mrs. Gommet, after a long hesitation outside her husband's room, finally braced herself to the effort to knock, and without waiting for a response, entered. Alieta heard a choking sort of cry, heard Mrs. Gommet's shrill voice, lowered and subdued, faltering in humble accents:

"Yes, Joe; it's me."

And then the door shut; and the woman, who had left the man in search of the excitement she called happiness, and the husband, who had tried to "slip out of it" in order to give her at least a chance to marry the other man and live decently, were alone with God and each other, in the solitude of their common sorrow and their bitter remorse.

XXII

ALIETA faced her fiancé in the zit-kameer at Odsani. She was strangely moved and impressed by what she had been through, by the tragedy she had unwittingly unveiled, had perhaps been instrumental in augmenting. She had very little hope of good resulting from her morning's mission. And, unaccountably, she felt a greater compassion for the woman than for the man, who had been more sinned against.

Mrs. Gommet's mood had affected her deeply, and Mrs. Gommet's words lingered in her memory with a sense of warning and future calamity: "A woman ought not to go through with marriage unless she is quite sure. It is only easy to make allowances before you are married to the man." She was not quite sure herself; and she had to make allowance for so much. Afterwards, when it was too late, she felt that for her, as for Mrs. Gommet, it would be less easy to condone little things. Temperamental differences that caused now but slight irritation might later assume quite a serious importance. And it was not only herself she would wrong in thus lightly undertaking a duty which might become unbearably irksome; she would be injuring Harold equally with herself. . . .

She took her courage in both hands and quite simply demanded to be released from her engagement.

"I want you," she said, looking at him squarely as

he sat on the sofa beside her, nursing his knee with his clasped hands, "to agree to the termination of our engagement. I feel—I can't help feeling—that it is a mistake."

He planted both feet firmly on the floor before replying and turned and looked at her with mouth agape. The colour flamed into his face and crimsoned his ears and neck.

"Why?" he demanded thickly, and had Alieta not been too thoroughly concerned with the immediate matter, she might have noticed that his manner was guiltily apprehensive.

"I don't think—we are suited to one another."

He pulled his fair mustache and eyed her suspiciously.

"What has made you so suddenly discover that?" he asked.

She folded her hands in her lap, and looked past him out through the window. She was endeavouring her hardest to blind herself to the real reason, but the truth was assertive and set the lesser reasons at defiance.

"I don't love you in the right way. . . . I don't love you as a woman should love her husband," she replied, unconsciously quoting Heckraft.

"Has Mrs. Gommet been saying anything?" he demanded.

"Mrs. Gommet!" Alieta looked surprised. "What has Mrs. Gommet to do with it?" she asked.

"Nothing, of course," he answered quickly. "Only you were all right till I left you with her."

Alieta considered this.

"Well, perhaps in a way, she has something to do with making me see things in a fresh light. . . . You see, she made a mistake. And what incalculable harm her mistake has wrought. . . . It has ruined two

lives. Suppose you and I married, and discovered later we were unsuited to one another?"

"You wouldn't make a fool of yourself like Mrs. Gommet," he returned with conviction. "You're not her sort. . . . And I'm not like Gommet."

"Life might still be as great a tragedy though it were lived with outward decency," she said.

He stared at her.

"Look here, Alieta, you drop that tone," he cried. "I don't know what's come over you. You used to be sweet and kind. . . . Think of me a bit,—you ought to. I love you, if ever a man loved a woman. See what I'm giving up for you!"

"What?" Alieta asked in a spiritless voice. "I think if you had been ready to give up things for me it might have been different. But what are you giving up?"

"I've all but quarrelled with my family for you," he answered with his ready flush. "It's just hell at home. . . . You should see it."

She reached out and touched his sleeve.

"That isn't enough," she said gently. "It doesn't help."

"Not enough!" he snorted. "You'd see me in rags, I suppose, before you were convinced. What more can a man do than quarrel with his parents? . . . If I hadn't a penny to jingle on a tombstone, it might appeal to your unpractical mind as rather fine and heroic, but when you tried to live on it you'd have graver doubts about matrimony than you entertain at present. Don't be a sentimentalist, Alieta. If you trust me, things will pan out all right."

"It isn't only that," Alieta answered gravely. "I think it only right to tell you, Harold. . . . When I accepted you I did so knowing very little of men

and the world; if you had come to me now my answer would have been different."

"You mean," he said, and his eyes flamed with sudden passion and understanding, "that you've seen someone else you like?"

Alieta hesitated. The bright colour came into her cheeks, and her eyelids drooped in quick embarrassment over the shamed eyes.

"I suppose," she said very quietly, not denying it, "that you have a right to ask that question."

"Yes," he almost shouted,—"and a right to an answer. . . . Heckraft's been making love to you,—that's about the size of it. Damn him for a double-dyed scoundrel!—Coming up here and stealing another man's girl because he's not on the spot."

"Don't!" Alieta rose quickly, and went and stood by the mantel with her arm on the low shelf. "You make me almost hate you when you talk like that."

"Well, but ——" he spluttered, and rose too, and followed her, standing on the other side of the fireless hearth. "What would you think if I was up to jilting you because I'd seen some other girl in the interval? Come now, Alieta, be fair. I've lived for you ever since I knew you—ever since I knew you," he repeated, as though to assure himself as much as the girl standing in a listening silence with her eyes fixed gravely on his.

"Just over a year," she said.

"Just over a year!" he repeated savagely, and added in a tone of fresh aggravation: "I'd have been a better man, perhaps, if I'd known you sooner. But anyway," his tone became self-excusing, almost laudatory, "I've not been such a bad hat as many another. And I mean to run straight now—always—from to-day, for your sake."

Alieta lifted her strained face to his. She did not

understand why he was saying all this. It occurred to her as beside the point. She had never supposed that he was doing other than run straight.

"But surely you won't hold me to my engagement after what I have admitted?" she asked.

"Surely I will," he answered. "I'm not giving you up to Heckraft, nor anyone else. You liked me well enough twelve months ago. If things had worked smoothly we'd have been married by now. . . . By God! Alieta, you can't jack me up for no better reason than you've given." He leaned towards her suddenly and seized her hands. "If you want to send me to the devil you're going the right way to do it. I worship you," he cried passionately, his voice breaking on a rising sob. "If you send me away, you ruin me. . . . Alieta!—Alieta!—you won't break me like that?"

Alieta left her hands within his, and answered nothing. What was there to say in face of his fierce refusal to consider her plea? She must leave things as they were for a time. At least she had the satisfaction of knowing that there was no immediate prospect of marriage with him.

Johnson left Odsani that day with black anger in his heart, resentful anger against Alieta, and hatred of the man who had come between him and the woman he was engaged to. It would have given him immense satisfaction to have gone forth secretly and killed Heckraft; but that game was too dangerous; it entailed ugly risks. If only there were some means —some means, safe and comfortable for himself— of getting rid of the fellow. . . .

His mind was inflamed with rage, distorted and unbalanced with the sense of injury done to himself. Something that was his was in danger of being treacherously stolen, and it was up to him to see that the

traitor should be punished and the treasure preserved.

The thought of challenging Heckraft, of having a set-to with fists, occurred to him, and was instantly rejected. He was not sure that he would get the best of it. For a space he considered the idea of horse-whipping the manager. It was a time-honoured practice, and the dignified thing to do in the circumstances. But there again he felt uncertain of his advantage, even armed with a sjambok. The manager was not a small man. The idea that Johnson had formed of him that he was muscular and would probably defend himself. The dignity of flogging another man depends largely upon whether you succeed.

And then, with disconcerting suddenness the opportunity to visit his wrath upon the object that excited it presented itself. He shot round a bend in the road at reckless speed without sounding his hooter, and missed by the merest shave the accomplishment of his desire to launch Heckraft into eternity at very little risk to himself. It took him years to recover from the disappointment of that moment, when he realised, as soon as he had time to realise anything, that had he studied the etiquette of the road and been on his right side he must have run down the manager, who, absorbed in his own thoughts, was riding aimlessly with slackened rein, heedless of possible traffic on the little frequented road. Heckraft's horse, shying after its habit, unseated him and threw him over the bonnet of the car. Johnson stopped the car suddenly with a grinding noise, a vicious hope in his heart that in skidding through the abrupt application of the brakes he might by good luck strike the fallen man. But the luck was all against him. Heckraft scrambled to his feet unhurt, and, obeying his first instinct, looked round sharply for his horse, while Johnson filled the silence with unprintable

words. Finding that his horse had completely disappeared, and catching something of the sense of the other man's highly coloured phrases, he swung round again.

"Are you swearing at me?" he asked.

Here, ready made, was the opportunity Johnson had wished for. What more favourable chance to pick a quarrel could any man desire? He had but to reply in the affirmative with the addition of further insulting terms, and they would be out in the road and at it in earnest. But the contemplation of a thing and the reality of it are wholly different. A man may be a hero theoretically who in practice proves a coward. He surveyed Heckraft critically, running a speculative eye over the strong, well-knit figure. There was something so deliberately calculating in the glance that Heckraft could not fail to notice it; he perceived also that the swift scrutiny took in, and noted with frank satisfaction, his bandaged right hand.

Johnson parried the question in a cautious attempt to determine beforehand the issue of a possible combat.

"You've hurt yourself," he said. "When was that?"

"Oh! days ago. It's practically well."

This was unsatisfactory. An old sore is not much of a deterrent when a man's blood is up.

"You were riding all over the road," Johnson complained. "If I hadn't been jolly smart there would have been an accident."

"You were so jolly smart that there was an accident," Heckraft retorted. "I suppose you mean, if you hadn't been on your wrong side you would have been over me?"

"Lucky for you, anyway," Johnson returned.

He sat back in his seat and surveyed the dust-

soiled figure in the road with smouldering animosity. It occurred to him that, since he had lost his horse, the manager would expect him to take him back in the car. Well, he could expect. He would see him damned first, and then he wouldn't. . . .

"I was on my road to see you," he remarked with the distant manner of one who rebukes a subordinate for flagrant neglect of duty. "How is it we haven't been informed of Gommet's incapacity?"

Heckraft had expected this, and because of the many complications involved, he received it quietly, swallowing the insult of the younger man's manner, distasteful though it was.

"Gommet is only on his back for a day or two," he said. "By the time I had informed you, and you had sent up another man—supposing you preferred to do so—he will be about again. In the meanwhile, I can manage pretty well."

"We ought to have been told," Johnson persisted, returning to his point, unable to subdue his bullying propensities, and encouraged by the other's unexpectedly quiet way of receiving the rebuke. "Who in hell are you that you should take it upon yourself to manage matters without consulting us? A man has been kicked out of his job for less than that."

Heckraft's blood was not of the quality that remains cool long under provocation. He advanced a step. There was something in his eyes and the forward thrust of his chin which Johnson did not altogether like the look of. This man was not so easily subdued as he had supposed.

"Look here, Mr. Johnson," he said, "I don't know quite what you're after; but I don't like your tone. If you're spoiling for a row, say so. . . . You needn't entertain scruples on account of my hand; it's quite equal to the job."

Johnson, who had been about to say something relative to his objections to hit a lame man, refrained, and instead fell to regarding the speaker with a look of cold surprise.

"Don't be a fool," he said sharply. "I've no quarrel with you. . . . It is, as a matter of fact, my governor's concern more than mine. I'll have to report to him. . . . And you'll probably hear further of it from him," he added, as he set the car in motion again and drove off.

"I probably shall hear from him," Heckraft mused, pursuing on foot the road taken by the car. "And if you can colour the picture dark enough, it's quite possible that it will be the kick out."

He quickened his pace, and his chin shot forward again.

"Well, confound you! kick," he muttered. "There's always Nooitgedacht to fall back upon."

XXIII

MAD HANTZ shuffled his way slowly through the dust of the road, trailing his rope behind him, and leaving a long serpentine impression to mark his zigzag upward course. His hirsute countenance wore an expression of savage perplexity. In some less clouded portion of the darkened mind memory was stirring, exciting him to undue efforts at thought, such as a brute might show who has been taught to perform a trick and is called upon by a superior intelligence to make his exhibition.

What was it the person who travelled rapidly, more rapidly than he could when he walked his fastest, when he even ran, and who seemed always to be enveloped in a cloud of dust, had said to him? . . .

He wrinkled his forehead underneath its thatch of hair and drew his overhanging brows together in a frown so fierce that anyone, meeting him and seeing him so, would have flown in terror at his approach. A quick, ferocious gleam came into his eyes. The person who had stopped and spoken to him had talked with him about the Devil. He remembered that much. Duivel!—It was a familiar word. What was it he had had to say about the Devil? . . .

Again the heavy brows were knitted in the unaccustomed effort to think, and again, quite suddenly, and after a long while, came another gleam of recollection. The person who had talked so understandingly about the Devil had taken out a handkerchief

and bound it about his hand in demonstration of what he said. Yes; he remembered now: he had spoken of the Devil, and had bound a piece of rag about his hand. . . .

But why had he done that? . . .

The further effort to think proved too great a strain on the dulled intelligence. The transitory gleam of understanding vanished, and the darkened mind became once more a blank. But the ill work had been well accomplished; the dull brain had received its impression; it only needed some further sign which would serve to brighten that impression, to set working the latent ferocity in the breast of this less than brute who once had been a man.

The link which was to connect the particular and definite information with which the madman had been furnished with the chain of desire which his unbalanced mind cherished in the altogether praiseworthy wish to rid the world of evil, was even then in view. Heckraft came swinging along down the hill, and seeing Hantz, and recognising in him his silent but harmless companion during a lonely vigil, he apprehended no danger from the encounter, and came on at a good pace. Hearing footsteps in advance of seeing the approach, owing to his habit of keeping his gaze fixed earthwards, the madman slowly raised his eyes; they reached a point, and were arrested there. A sudden gleam of remembrance shot into them. Not once did he raise his eyes further than Heckraft's bandaged hand, but with the swift spring of some wild animal, he was on him, pinioning him with his long powerful arms, pressing upon him with his knees, bearing him slowly backwards.

Heckraft attempted to call for help, in the hope that some of his boys might be within hearing and come to his aid, but the madman stifled the cry be-

fore ever it reached his lips, choking it with his talon-like, dirty fingers so that it broke in a gurgle in his throat. The horrible part to Heckraft, as he felt himself shaken backwards and forwards in the powerful grip like a reed moved by the wind, was that his assailant never uttered a sound. It was like being gripped by Death himself, Death in a horrible, vindictive guise, repellant and unutterably evil, without promise of anything beyond. So might the most hopeless of sinners feel, plunged in the worst of infernos.

He struggled futilely, but fiercely. The one dominant thought that obtruded itself insistently, in spite of his anguish, was that he must fight for his life, that, foregone though the result of so unequal a contest was, he must prolong the agony until he could struggle no more. Vainly but furiously he strove with the madman, who, it appeared to him, was climbing up him, clutching and climbing, with gripping hands and knees that pressed on his chest. His chief thought was to protect his throat; that was the big necessity, to prevent himself from being strangled. He caught at the dirty, hairy wrists and dragged at them, till he felt his resistance weakening, and realised despairingly that the end was near. The world which had seemed so sunny and bright a short while before, suddenly darkened. In his dazed and bewildered condition it seemed to him that he had been struggling for hours and that night must surely be advancing.

They were near the edge of the path. Below the road was a short drop, and then a steep but easy slope of some hundred feet. If only by good luck he could manage to roll them both over, it was possible that those gripping fingers, which were strangling the life out of him, might relax. But the madman also

seemed aware of that pitfall; for he resisted the other's efforts and worked more to the middle of the road.

He had got the Devil at last, the Devil who was to be recognised by the innocent looking, but unholy, linen he wore bound about his hand. The mission of his life was to slay the Devil. It was to him a great satisfaction that the Devil was not easy to kill,—all the surer proof, if he wanted proof, that this was he.

And then unexpectedly while he pressed harder on his foe, pressed so that he bore him earthward, and had him helpless and at his mercy, with his long bony fingers on the exposed throat, a tobacco pouch, with some long strands of golden tobacco hanging untidily from it, fell from the pocket of Heckraft's rent coat. The madman saw it, and in a moment his mood changed. His fury of homicidal rage died out. Like a beggar swooping for coppers, or a greedy child scrambling for sweets, he sprawled across his victim and clutched at the coveted weed. He grasped the pouch, and then as though fearful of having to share, or at least to struggle for the possession of his prize, he removed himself to a short distance and sat in the dust at the roadside devouring the tobacco hungrily, as he had done on the night that Heckraft met him on the veld. Whether some wave of thought put into action by the taste of the weed set the feeble mind working back to that former occasion is doubtful; but ever and again he raised his eyes furtively from the pouch he held and was eagerly tearing open, and turned them shiftily upon the inert figure lying in the road. He looked like a large sly ape consciously stealing while his master sleeps.

When he had finished the tobacco, he flung away the pouch as far as he could fling it, as he had done before, and rose. Then, while he stood winding the

rope, which he had dropped and since recovered, about his wrists, and eyeing with a puzzled, suspicious scrutiny the huddled figure in the road, another extraordinary event befel. Someone else, travelling rapidly in a cloud of dust, appeared in view. He recalled vaguely that before someone who travelled in this fashion had stopped and hailed him, and troubled him with much talking; and unmindful to be again harassed after this manner he caught up his rope and turned aside from the road, making rapidly for the open country and the peaceful solitude of the valley. It made his head whirl when persons who travelled rapidly stopped and plagued him with numberless questions.

And he had a long way to go yet if he were to find the Devil before night. If he were to find the Devil. . . . He paused irresolute. He had found the Devil. He had killed him. He laughed aloud vacantly. Then he went on. The world was full of devils. His mission still remained.

The second car, the appearance of which had so disconcerted Hantz, stopped when it came upon the obstruction in the road, and Doctor Seely, alighting and approaching the prostrate man, bent over him to discover what was amiss. He immediately recognised Heckraft, and his face expressed his surprise. Prior to going down on his knees beside him, he had seen, and looked after with a suspicious scrutiny for the purpose of future identification, the tall, hurrying figure of Hantz as it disappeared across the veld.

Heckraft had struck his head against a stone in falling and was temporarily stunned. He came to as the medical man stooped over him, and struggled into a sitting posture. For the moment the immediate past was wiped out from his memory. The sight of the standing motor, in his dazed condition, took him

back to the earlier mishap. He put his hand to the back of his head. The stone had been a sharp one and had made an odd triangular scalp wound, nothing worse. His hand when he looked at it was blood-stained.

"Always fall on my head," he grumbled. . . . "That's the second time that brute has thrown me."

Then he stared at the doctor, and slowly memory returned.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned, and looked about him anxiously. "Where is he?" he asked.

Doctor Seely made a backward motion with his head in the direction Hantz had taken.

"Gone," he answered, and added: "Handled you a bit roughly, eh? . . . I'll take you back in the car. I was on my way to visit Gommet."

He helped Heckraft to rise.

"Shaky?" he said encouragingly, as Heckraft stood unsteadily upon his feet. "That will soon pass."

"Shaky!" Heckraft shook himself free, and stood firmer. "It was the nearest thing to being murdered I hope I'll ever experience. It was like a terrier with a rat. . . . Never felt such a babe in my life before. And she said that fellow was harmless."

"Who said?"

Heckraft saw fit to ignore the question.

"Chaps like that ought not to be allowed to run about loose," he complained. "Aren't there any lunacy laws in this blessed country?"

"Of course. But in these out of the way places they are not so strictly enforced as they should be. And, 'pon my word! I'd have answered for Hantz myself. He's been about here for years and never molested anyone. What were you doing to throw him into a rage?"

Heckraft looked justly indignant.

"I was walking along the road, as anyone might," he answered. "I saw him coming; but—dash it all! —I had heard he was considered harmless. . . . And I had spent a night in his company once, when I got lost in the veld. I didn't enjoy that experience particularly, but he was quiet enough. If I'd guessed there was a chance of his attacking me I should have been prepared. They told me he was looking for the Devil."

He broke off abruptly, and stared thoughtfully down the road. Certain words Johnson had spoken on that occasion, when he, with Alieta, had taken him up in the car, jerked themselves into his mind. It was odd, he reflected, that he should recall those words now; there had been something prophetic in them: "It would have been an awkward thing for Heckraft if Hantz had mistaken him for the object of his search." Possibly Hantz had mistaken him for the Devil, and it had been awkward, very.

"I wonder!" he said, and struggled with the doubt in his mind. "Oh, rot!" he ejaculated softly. "That would be a bit too low, even for him."

Doctor Seely looked puzzled.

"Too low for whom?" he asked.

"I fancy lunacy must be infectious," Heckraft responded with a brief laugh, "or that knock on the head has dazed me; I'm drivelling."

He got into the car, and Doctor Seely motored him to Gommet's house. Heckraft expressed his intention of going straight to the hotel, but the doctor quashed this idea.

"You are coming inside," he said. "You may not be aware of the fact, but you look as though you had taken part in a prize fight. . . . There's work for me."

"I know I'm a beastly exhibition," Heckraft an-

swered. "That's why I'd rather go on to the hotel. I can walk it all right."

"I daresay. But it will save time, and be much more satisfactory if you come inside."

Doctor Seely quite understood that Heckraft's reluctance arose from his dislike to be seen in his present condition by Alieta Van der Vyver; but, having passed the romantic age himself, the expediency of getting Heckraft inside and his hurts attended to with the certainty of a sufficient supply of boiling water and other requisites, occurred to him as of greater importance; and he overruled his objections.

It was the greatest surprise he remembered to have ever experienced when, on entering the house, followed reluctantly by Heckraft wearing the appearance of some sheepish malefactor, he was confronted in the passage by Mrs. Gommet, who looked at him uncertainly, looked past him at Heckraft, whose presence there, as well as his condition, needed for her some explanation, and then in a sudden quick embarrassment allowed her eyes to fall.

Doctor Seely was so taken by surprise that for fully half a minute his ready tactfulness deserted him, and he stared at her in a wonderment too complete for words. Heckraft, in his rear, grew increasingly uncomfortable. He knew who this woman was without being told; he jumped to it instinctively, and without the faintest doubt that he was right. He did not pause to wonder how she came there; it was sufficient for him that there she was. Without waiting for the silence to be broken, he turned about and bolted. Doctor Seely, recalled perhaps by the action of his going, though he was too genuinely astonished to be consciously aware of his departure—he had, as a matter of fact, forgotten him altogether—advanced suddenly and gripped Mrs. Gommet's hand.

"This is the pleasantest surprise I have ever had in my life," he said with quiet sincerity. "You have come at the best time possible, Mrs. Gommet. And I am sure all your freinds will be as glad as I am to welcome you home."

Would they? . . .

Mrs. Gommet raised a guilt-conscious countenance to his. A certain defiance which had shown in her manner at his entry gave place to a swift look of gratitude. Unaccountably at that moment there came into her mind, and lingered there for long afterwards, the words: "Let him who has never sinned be the one to cast the first stone."

XXIV

IT is not always in this world of unequal chances that a man reaps as he has sown. Though fairly sound logic that what one puts into life one takes out of it, in many cases—and this is more particularly noticeable in undeveloped countries where the man of greater enterprise and fewer scruples forges rapidly ahead—retribution does not necessarily follow with that fine sense of poetic justice which the moralist always hopes for. But in the case of Harold Johnson it rather looked as if Justice had taken off her bandage and was intent only on a perfect adjustment of the scales.

To quote himself, Johnson had been a fool. He had opened the door to his own undoing. A woman spurned makes always a deadly enemy, and he had in this wise earned the hatred of Mrs. Gommet. It was fairly obvious to him that she was bent on making things unpleasant. He had received a letter from her. It was, as a matter of fact, in answer to a communication from him. Certain paragraphs in that letter were strangely disturbing to him. He had never in all his life felt so vindictive, and at the same time so impotent. She had him as entirely at her mercy as the victor who binds his captive to the wheel of his chariot. It was his own simile, nor did the lapse into ancient Roman history strike him as absurd. He almost felt the bonds galling his flesh. If it had not been for the discomforting recollection that Alieta

had already, for no apparent reason, demanded to be released from her engagement, he would have ignored Mrs. Gommet's letter and silently defied her to do her worst; but knowing how insecure was his present foothold, he trembled to think that anyone should possess the power to weaken the tottering supports upon which he stood.

He read, and re-read, that disturbing letter, pondering over certain paragraphs in it, cogitating in savage perplexity how he could square the writer, how circumvent her so that, while seeming to acquiesce in her stipulations, he might yet get his own way despite of her. . . .

If only Alieta had married him secretly! . . . If only she would consent to a secret marriage now! . . . But he knew, without appealing to her again, that Alieta would never agree to that.

It was probably due to the fact that Mrs. Gommet refused to accept anything further from him in any form that Johnson realised how complete was the break in their relations. There was an uncompromising finality in the tone of the letter that was peculiarly convincing even to a man who in such matters was fairly obtuse. She would have nothing of him, not even compensation; and his offer to her had been generous according to his lights.

"I am going back to drab respectability," she wrote, "not because I like it, but because I can't help myself. Everyone here is so kind to me; they are forcing me to be decent-living as surely as if, had they been otherwise, they would have driven me to the other extreme. I have no choice. I shall spend the rest of my life here among wattles, doing my duty by Joe, although I know I shall hate it. . . ."

And further on:—

"I don't want to see you ever again. If you had

been faithful to me, I'd have lived for you and given up everything else. But your sort are never faithful. If you haven't been faithful to the girl you intend to marry, what will you be when she is your wife? You shall never marry Alieta,—about that I am fully determined. She is too good for you. She is too good for me to tell her—unless you force me to tell her—what you are. You must give her up, and I will keep silent. If you won't consent to this, if there is no other way in which to prevent her marriage with you, I will confide to her the story of the past five years. . . ."

What, in the face of a beastly, vindictive threat like that, was a man to do? . . .

Johnson crushed the letter into a ball. Then he smoothed it out again, folded it neatly and locked it away in a drawer. Perhaps it would be advisable to keep it. In consideration of the fact that it contained a point blank refusal of his really handsome offer to recognise her claim upon him, it might be useful to have it to refer to in the event of future complications. With a beast like Gommet a man might be let in for blackmail. Nevertheless, he decided on reflection, he would not show up particularly well if he were called upon to produce that letter in evidence. The writer had conceived it in the ill-considered, nasty spirit of a female cat.

Johnson was dining that evening at the Raths, very much against his inclination, nor had the receipt of Mrs. Gommet's letter added to the festiveness of his mood. The Raths had been back in Durban nearly a month, and during the whole time he had managed, against the combined scheming of his parents, and the persistent kindness of the Raths, to avoid meeting them. But there is a limit to the most ingenious mind in the manufacture of plausible excuses; and

to the extreme gratification of his mother, and to his own chagrin, he had been pressed into attending this dinner party in honour of the coming of age of Muriel Rath. He had chafed before at the thought of going, now, with this new worry to harass him, the former disinclination was aggravated till it assumed a sense of personal injury at what he styled the indecent persistence with which these people pestered him. Their purpose was as obvious as, in view of his reluctance, it was indelicate.

It was a further source of irritation when, having arrived at the house, he discovered that for him was reserved the honour of taking Muriel in to dinner. This distinction was all the more marked on account of the large number of guests, and the fact that he was of lesser importance than many present. But, as Sir George told him when he graciously informed him of his good luck,—

"You and Muriel are such old friends. I know without consulting her that my arrangement will meet with her approval."

He felt as though he could have sworn at his urbane host.

And in a distant part of the room Mrs. Johnson was confiding to Lady Rath, a comfortable, homely old soul, who was devoted to her daughter and saw young Johnson only with her daughter's eyes, that Harold had so eagerly been looking forward to that evening, and had talked of no one but Muriel all the way in the carriage. She tactfully refrained from repeating what Harold had said.

Muriel Rath was not pretty. She was small and insignificant, with bright, bird-like eyes, and a sallow complexion; but to-night, with a flush lent by pleasurable excitement, and perfectly gowned in a dainty white Paris frock, her abundant dark hair becomingly

dressed, she looked distinctly attractive,—a dainty little girl, with the soft round contours of youth adding their inimitable charm. And she was so flatteringly and sincerely impressed with every banal utterance that her companion made, so untiring in her efforts to amuse him, and so pathetically grateful for the slightest response. In spite of his vexation Johnson found her society decidedly soothing. Following his recent rebuffs, this almost dog-like homage was gratifying. It helped in some degree to restore his lost sense of dignity. Mrs. Gommet's letter had made him feel—although he tried to bluff it—rather like a whipped cur.

"So you are an independent young woman now," he observed banteringly,—"privileged to defy authority and kick over the traces in any way that seems agreeable to you. What are you going to do with your liberty?"

She puckered her brows.

"I don't think it makes much difference, *really*," she said, in the earnest way she had, which was peculiarly irritating to him, of giving importance to every triviality. "Do you?"

"Well, if I had your income, I rather fancy it would," he answered.

"Oh! but you are *enormously* rich," she said, smiling.

His brow darkened.

"That's what many people think," he returned. "As a matter of fact, I'm a pauper."

"A pauper with a princely income."

"A pauper with a princely wage," he corrected. "There's a big distinction. Wages are liable to be stopped."

She laughed, imagining that he was joking.

"When you are reduced to penury," she said, the

smile still hovering about her lips, "remember that I'm an independent person of charitable instincts."

"All right," he said, "that's a bargain," and turned his attention to the next course.

He was almost sorry when the ladies left the dining-room. She had made him forget things, had reinstated him in his own regard.

"I'll see you later," he said, as she left him. "Keep a corner for me."

She nodded a smiling acquiescence. That was the happiest moment of an altogether happy day.

The men closed in and plunged straightway, as Johnson had known they would plunge, into a discussion on the Indian trouble, which from a fermenting and ever widening discontent was gathering rapidly to a head. Many of the men present employed Indian labour. Sir George Rath, having large interests in sugar plantations, and another man who had practically the control of the sugar industry in Natal, took active parts in the discussion.

"The biggest mistake," an outsider broke in on the somewhat bitter discussion, voicing the opinion of the disinterested party, "was getting Indian labour over in the first instance. The beggars are overrunning Natal. It's appalling as one travels on the line to see the numbers of fruit farms these chaps own. They'll possess half Natal in time. Their one idea is to acquire land. They can live cheaper than a Kaffir even, and they save, which a Kaffir can't. Then they purchase ground and settle. They'll have a monopoly of the fruit trade before long. Kick 'em out, I say, like they kicked out the Chinese, before greater harm is done."

"Can't spare them," stuck in Sir George. "How are you going to replace them in the labour market?"

"By employing the native." The speaker's tone

lacked confidence, because he knew what the answer would be.

"That's been tried and found no use. The Kaffir won't stick to his job."

"They manage with them on the mines. . . . One ought to give the preference to the native," a recent comer to the country opined.

The man with the big sugar interests looked across at the speaker with the indulgence of experience for the assurance which a want of knowledge of his subject gives the impulsive reformer.

"They manage with them on the mines," he repeated slowly, and blew a succession of smoke rings into the air.—"Yes." He took the cigar from his mouth. "Because they lock them up in compounds," he added, as though that explained everything,—as it does to one intimate with the African character.

The newcomer was athirst for information.

"Do you mean to say if those chaps weren't strictly confined they wouldn't stick to their job?" he asked.

"I mean that—yes. A few might, perhaps. But the Kaffir can't stick to his job. He is like an animal in its wild state, always on the move. He can't concentrate. Besides, work on the mines is altogether different from cane growing, or barking wattles; one requires muscular strength, the other calls for skilled labour. . . . No; I don't see how we're going to do without the Indian."

"Well, I jolly well know," put in Harold Johnson, speaking for the first time, "if our fellows strike, I'll get a gang of boys from Umlaas and let them do the work. No taking back of strikers for us."

Umlaas was one of the two large Kaffir locations close to Drummond. If the native labour was not equal to the Indian at least the supply was to hand.

"You can afford to do that," Sir George inter-

posed. "But for those among us whose interests depend largely on Indian labour, it's another matter."

"What's the particular grievance?" the Englishman inquired, realising that among this gathering of Natalians his home-born theories would not go down; no one seemed to wish to hear them.

"It's this new poll tax that is the big trouble. It hits the old residents in the country pretty hard. Three pounds a head is rather stiff for some of these fellows, and they resent being taxed for living in the country."

"Well, but isn't it rather rough?" the Englishman demanded.

The sugar magnate smiled dryly.

"We don't want 'em to live in the country," he replied. "We'd like to ship them back when they're through with their indentures; but the beggars won't go back. The poll tax was an ill-advised move on the part of the government, conceived with the idea of inducing them to return; instead it has served to give them a grievance. They had no real grievance before. The Coolie is better treated here than in his own country, and he knows it. It's the Arab merchants who are making the mischief and stirring the Coolies to revolt. They want full citizenship. They haven't citizenship in their own country, and they can't have it here. In consideration of their numbers it would be absurd to grant it."

"Oh! it's a big muddle, and it's going to be worse yet," someone else observed. "We may look for more trouble on the Rand before long."

"If the government takes a firm stand," Sir George Rath struck in with a view to preventing the conversation growing too serious, "we'll weather this storm all right. But the labour question is going to be the big question in Africa within the next few years. . . .

You study the subject, Harold, and we'll get you returned to represent us."

A laugh went round the table. It occurred to the Englishman that the red-faced, scowling young Colonial, who talked so bombastically of handling strikers was rather typical of the modern taste in candidates during crises calling for tactful and delicate handling. It is possibly this peculiarity of selection which makes the pursuit of politics so extremely elevating.

Johnson muttered something about having no stomach for politics, which nobody heeded, and again relapsed into silence. The talk had recalled his annoyances, and set his thoughts harking back. He was thinking regretfully of Alieta, of how altogether alluring she was, and how she would shine in this mixed assembly like an empress among commoners. Then his mind turned upon another woman of an altogether different type, who had seemed to him in his callow days the most delightful and desirable person in the world,—the auburn haired, soulless little creature who had written him that vindictive letter. He hated her now. He wondered at himself that he had ever found her attractive.

And then something someone was saying recalled him with a start to the present, to the consciousness of the indifferent, politely-bored faces of the men who lingered round the table in compliment to the host's vintage rather than in pleasurable enjoyment of the talk. All that they were saying now had been said before in offices and at the Club.

"Wasn't the fellow who got mauled by a madman at Drummond your manager?" someone asked Johnson senior.

"Yes."

Sir George Rath, who was interested in Heckraft

from a personal knowledge of him and his affairs, continued the subject.

"It's scandalous that a dangerous lunatic should be at large," he said.

"Well, they've shut him up now."

"When the mischief's done."

"Oh! Heckraft wasn't hurt,—not badly. Things might have been worse."

Sir George said something more, which young Johnson did not catch in the hum of general talk. His thoughts again reverted to his own immediate concerns. "Heckraft wasn't hurt. . . . Things might have been worse." In his opinion they were as bad as they could be. Luck was dead against him, that was evident. Mad Hantz had caught on to his instructions and bungled the job. A man should do his own dirty work, when there is dirty work to be done.

XXV

THE return of Mrs. Gommet had created its little stir in her circumscribed world, had called forth a few surprised remarks, a few ill-natured comments, which had been qualified later by a spirit of kindly tolerance that had found excuses for the wife as readily, perhaps more readily, than it had found pity for the deserted husband. The excitement of Gommet's accident, the greater excitement of his wife's return, soon simmered down; and life in the house of the engineer, save for a few radical changes, went back to the quiet routine, not of the bachelor establishment, but of the more systematic comfort of Mrs. Gommet's rule.

One of the first changes that marked Mrs. Gommet's return was the departure of Rudgubadi. Rudgubadi realised from the outset, with quick feminine intuition, that the coming of this missis portended greater things than the advent of the missis with the hair like the mimosa blooms, and the air of quiet authority, who had assumed control of things without usurping rights. This new missis wore an air of authority also, an authority that was autocratic, to which no limit could be set. Rudgubadi knew, without having things explained to her, that this missis had come to stay, that her coming boded no good to herself. She thought about the matter seriously, and then conferred with her nephew.

"This missis is the Sahib's missis," she said. "She remains."

"What then?" asked Mambersad, with his eyes on his aunt's inscrutable face. Mambersad would as readily take his orders from this missis as from his aunt. But the woman would not have it so.

"It is written," she returned, in the far away tone of the seer, and fixed her burning glance on Mambersad's wondering countenance. "I go with my people. . . . It is written."

Mambersad looked troubled. He was very content where he was, but he knew that Rudgubadi would not allow him to remain. If she elected to follow her people she would force him to go with her. He was young, but he had listened to the talk at Mafuza's kraal, and he understood that passive resistance meant much weary marching, and perhaps an empty stomach. He eyed Rudgubadi askance.

"I stay," he muttered obstinately.

She turned upon him wrathfully.

"Little pig!" she cried. "Son of an Infidel! . . . Would you become a traitor to your own people?"

"There is plenty rice in Natal," he answered sulkily. "I stay."

But Rudgubadi's quick ear detected that, though he still spoke with quiet obstinacy, his resolve was weakening. She said no more. She knew, as he knew, that when the time came he would go.

As a matter of fact, he did go. Rudgubadi and her nephew were among those passive resisters who followed their leader Gandhi, in protest against their grievances, and actually crossed the border and entered the Transvaal. They drifted back eventually, when the futile demonstration, which threw so many Indians out of work, and gained Gandhi a fleeting notoriety and a brief incarceration, was over; but neither of them returned to Drummond; and Mambersad, having suffered through his aunt's influence,

took the opportunity to lose her on the march back; and discovered in the course of time, as many people have discovered, that an entire absence of relations proves helpful, rather than a deterrent, to a prosperous and peaceful journey through life. We choose our friends, our relations are thrust upon us, and, as in Mambersad's case, they not infrequently assume a quite unwarrantable right to interfere in our affairs.

Gommet was about again long before the Indian trouble reached a head. He appeared, save for occasional moments of brooding depression, quietly happy in the return of the one woman he had loved, and still loved, despite the ugly fact of those five years of separation which each had agreed should remain a closed chapter in their lives. Gommet in forgiving his wife had wiped the affair out as though it had never been. He invited neither explanation nor confession. He simply refused to speak about it. Forgiveness was necessary on both sides, and it was best to forget.

The moods of depression were probably the result as much of his illness as of mental worry. As an evidence of that illness he carried about, and would always carry, an ugly scar, a scar which was peculiarly noticeable on the long, thin, brown throat. Gommet never wore any collar but the low, turned down collar of his shirt.

Mrs. Gommet's eyes had a habit of fastening themselves on this scar, at first in shuddering aversion, but later, as they grew familiar with the sight, in a kind of fascinated wonder. Often when she looked at it she would make an excuse of fetching something, and passing behind his chair, would touch his hair or his hand in a half furtive caress.

That was the pleasant side of the picture, as Heckraft, who was back in his place, saw it. There were

frequent lapses into peevish irritability, and as time went on and Gommet grew quite strong again, this wifely devotion, so good to see, became much more rare. Mrs. Gommet's inherent coquetry bubbled to the surface, the dregs of frivolity in her nature which under certain conditions came to the top like scum, were no less there because for a while her undeniable better qualities kept them under. She attempted to flirt with Heckraft. An idea that the manager was in love with her grew in her foolish little brain. She observed that whenever she caressed her husband in that pretty, impulsive, shy way of hers, Heckraft invariably made some pretext of leaving them alone together. She misconstrued his motive, which was actuated by a sympathetic consideration for Gommet, who after the lean years had come upon the good; she imagined that every sign of tenderness between herself and her husband was a stab in Heckraft's breast, and she often "stabbed" him deliberately in pursuance of a game in which she invariably found amusement. Life was not so unutterably dull, even on a wattle plantation, when there was someone eating his heart out in a hopeless passion for herself. Let him love her. . . . Why shouldn't he? . . . In her determination to walk thenceforward solely along the straight path, it was quite safe for both. She would be a moral influence in his life,—his desired, unattainable star. . . . Her undereducated, sordid little mind was so overcrowded with vain, sentimental rubbish of this nature that a certain common sense with which she was less generously endowed was apt to get pushed into the background, so almost asphyxiated beneath the general disorder, that it was not easily brought to the front, nor had it sufficient strength to push its way there unaided through the indulged philosophy of a degenerate intelligence.

Had Mrs. Gommet's common sense struggled more frequently into the light she must have realised her mistake. Heckraft, far from being in love with her, did not even like her. He felt constrained in her society, and particularly disliked to be left alone with her. He was not conscious of the game she was playing; it was possibly too feminine for him to have understood; but the subtle change in her bearing towards him when they were alone, disconcerted him oddly; it was all the more embarrassing because it was too subtle to define. He regretted—not Mrs. Gommet's return; he was glad of that on Gommet's account; the man was so supremely happy in his wife—he regretted his share in Nooitgedacht. Had Mrs. Gommet figured in the scene earlier he would not have entered into that partnership. And there were other reasons why the prospect of living at Drummond no longer appealed to him.

The purchase of Nooitgedacht was, although not an unqualified joy, a source of pleasurable anticipation to Mrs. Gommet. If she had to live on a wattle plantation, she preferred to live on their own property. It agreed no longer with her sense of fitness that her husband should work on Johnson's estate.

She drove over with Gommet to inspect the property, and expressed her entire approval of the house, which was larger and altogether prettier than the one they lived in. She would have liked to move in at once, and said so.

The commodious mud and wattle huts which Gommet had planned for himself, and which were then in the process of erection, well within sight of the house, puzzled her. She demanded an explanation. They spoilt the harmony of the view. Gommet, who was busy training a creeper about the stoep, explained that he had had them built for his own use.

"You see," he said, "I thought Tony would have the house."

"But why?" she asked quickly, breaking off a branch of francesia from a bush near the path, and smelling the sweet scented flowers. "There's room for both."

"Yes." Gommet looked up. "But Tony will want a house to himself when he marries," he said.

Mrs. Gommet had her back to the speaker. She bent her head over the flowers she held and buried her face in them.

"I didn't know—there was any thought of that," she returned slowly. "Is he engaged?"

"Not exactly. But he's very much in love."

"Who with?"

"Alieta."

"Alieta!" Mrs. Gommet's voice was sharp with surprise and incredulity. Many conflicting emotions warred with each other for mastery, but vanity conquered eventually. She absolutely refused to entertain so ridiculous an idea. "She told me herself, she is engaged to Harold Johnson. You must be mistaken," she declared.

"She may have told you that. . . . Anyway, she cares for Tony, and he's pretty badly hit. So I take it there'll be a wedding, and it won't be Johnson's. Don't speak of this, though."

Slowly Mrs. Gommet began pulling to pieces the scented petals of the francesia. Finally she crushed the spray in her hand, and flung it away pettishly.

"Of course not," she answered. And then asked abruptly: "Why?"

"Well, it's hanging fire just now."

A faint smile curved her lips. She believed that she understood. She glanced quickly at her husband. He was still busy with the creeper he was training

to beautify their future home. His expression was intent and sublimely satisfied. The smile on her lips deepened.

"Anyway, they are not going to have our house," she remarked.

She stepped up to the stoep. Gommet left his work, and joined her with a chuckle of delight.

"You like the house?" he said, and slipped a hand within her arm. "I'm so glad. . . . I wish now I'd gone in on my own. I could easily have raised the money. . . . Only I didn't know—and Tony seemed keen on it too."

"Oh! it's just as well as it is," she answered, thinking how intolerably dull it would be out there without the manager to flirt with. A woman could not be expected to find the sole society of her husband perennially satisfying.

Gommet reflected.

"Perhaps I'll be able to buy him out later," he said with cheery optimism.

Mrs. Gommet made no response to this. Her mind was busy with other matters. She was thinking of a letter which she had written to Johnson in which she had told him he should not marry Alieta. . . . Why had she written that? . . . . What did it matter to her whom Alieta married? Almost at that moment she hated Alieta. Alieta had taken Harold Johnson from her. She had forgiven that because the theft had been unconscious, and the girl had approached her with a generous kindness at a moment when most people would have held aloof. Yes; she could forgive that. But this deliberate attempt to win the love of another man when she was already engaged was conduct she found it less easy to excuse; there was a quality of meanness about it. By an odd twist of conscience, Mrs. Gommet saw herself by comparison

in the favourable light of a woman who would refuse to stoop to so petty a level. She felt more than ever called upon to act as Heckraft's guardian angel. A resolve to protect him from the Dutch girl's wiles formed itself in her mind.

She freed her arm from Gommet's.

"Go on with your gardening," she said; "I am going inside out of the glare."

She wanted to be alone. Joe's simple pleasure in everything accorded ill with her mood. She turned round and waved to him from the doorway, and Gommet, who had felt slightly rebuffed, suddenly smiled. He continued to smile after she had passed inside the house, and he had gone back to his work in the sunshine below the stoep.

XXVI

MRS. GOMMET quite suddenly and unexpectedly took to calling Heckraft by his Christian name. He was rather surprised at this, but beyond the feeling of mild wonderment it did not interest him. Gommet called him Tony, so perhaps it was natural that Mrs. Gommet should fall into the habit.

"It's such an uncommon name," she said. "I like it."

She had said the same to her husband in regard to his name in the early days before he became her husband. Heckraft did not receive the compliment with the delight which Gommet had shown.

"It always strikes me as a fool of a name," he answered, surveying her dispassionately. "They gave it to me out of compliment to an old man who was expected to leave me a fortune, and didn't."

"How horrid of him!" she exclaimed.

"Well, I don't know. . . . One can so easily avoid those kind of disappointments by not looking for benefits."

"Were you disappointed?" she asked.

Heckraft laughed.

"I was a bit sick at being saddled with his name to no purpose," he replied.

Besides her liking for his name, Mrs. Gommet revealed a genuine love for his music. Whenever she could persuade him, and he was not usually difficult

to persuade, she kept him playing to her hour after hour. She liked best to sit in the dusk and listen, and forgetful of her surroundings, weave an imaginary setting for the scene in which Gommet, smoking his homely briar as was his invariable custom, seldom figured. She usually sat framed in the opening of the window, with her small pointed chin uplifted, supported on the back of her hand, her gaze on the purple void. She rightly supposed the pose to be effective. But the man for whom she posed looked beyond her, always peering into the gathering mists for the dearly loved form which now never came, as he drew his bow across the quivering strings and played with his soul in his music to the woman who carried his heart in the warm shelter of her bosom.

"I wish we had a piano," Mrs. Gommet said once, with a note of regret in her voice. She looked up at Heckraft. "I expect you prefer to be accompanied, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. A violin needs the piano, really."

"There would be no one to accompany him if we had a piano," Gommet interposed easily. "You couldn't play the things Tony plays. . . . Alieta might."

Mrs. Gommet frowned in the dim light.

"Do you always play by ear?" she asked, trying to keep the anger out of her tones.

"Generally," Heckraft answered. "It's a bad practice, but it's easier."

"It's nicer, I think," she said. "Besides, it's handier for playing in the dark." She turned and faced him abruptly with a desire after effect rather than sincerity. "Your music speaks," she said. "It makes me feel that I want to be—good."

He may have detected the absence of sincerity, or he may not. Suddenly, almost without his volition, it

seemed, he began to tell her of the engineer of the *Ariadne* and the crumpled rose-leaf which was his crippled child. Mrs. Gommet was nothing if not emotional. When he came to a pause the tears were in her eyes.

"It's a great gift," she said,—"to make one see beauty in unloveliness."

"Isn't it rather," he corrected gently, "that it gives one the greater perception to see the beauty which unloveliness merely conceals?"

Mrs. Gommet caught at the idea of a clearer spiritual vision borrowed from the soul of emotion at its highest, and for a while her flimsy frivolity fell from her.

"I suppose that's it," she agreed quite simply. . . . "But it's odd to hear a man say that."

Heckraft looked amused.

"A little priggish, perhaps," he allowed, in a lighter tone, as he placed his instrument carefully in its case.

Mrs. Gommet, watching him, offered no verbal contradiction, though it ran through her mind at the moment that priggish was not the term. Stirred by the music, and oppressed physically as well as mentally by the heat of the little room, by its confined space, its exasperating ordinariness, she slipped out of the window and sauntered down the road, hoping, indeed confidently expecting, that Heckraft would follow her. Heckraft, however, failing her as he did sufficiently often to disabuse her mind of many erroneous ideas she had formed concerning him, lighted his pipe and sat down opposite Gommet.

"This Indian disaffection is spreading rapidly," he observed. "In Durban and Maritzburg the strike seems to have become general."

Gommet nodded assent.

"They've started firing the canes along the coast,"

he said, with a certain grim hardness in his voice.

"And we are sandwiched between the disaffected areas," Heckraft remarked after a slight pause.

Gommet sat up suddenly, and taking a letter from his pocket tossed it across to the speaker.

"Why the devil haven't we a light?" he grumbled, and rising, set about lighting the lamp on the table. When he had replaced the globe on the lamp he swung round.

"That, though it's addressed to me, should by right have been sent to you as manager," he observed, indicating the letter in Heckraft's hand with the stem of his pipe. "It contains orders from headquarters as to how we are to act in the event of our boys striking. Perhaps you'll inform me why young Johnson sends his orders to you through me?"

"How should I know?" Heckraft responded.

He read the letter and returned it.

"Confound it!" he muttered.

"Ties our hands, eh?" Gommet observed, regarding the distinctly annoyed face of his companion as he sat frowning and staring reflectively at the light. "We're to keep him informed, and to take no steps without his authority. One would imagine we were blooming serangs. . . . What are you going to do?"

Heckraft looked up gloomily.

"Take my orders from the source whence I draw my salary, I suppose," he answered. . . . "There's nothing else for it."

Gommet fidgeted with the letter for a space; finally he made a spill with it and holding it over the chimney of the lamp till it caught the flame, leisurely proceeded to relight his pipe which had gone out.

"You must do as you think fit," he rejoined. "Only if you act on my advice, you'll emulate a certain famous sailor who turned his wall-eye on what he

didn't want to see. I'm going to be jolly well blind to the disaffection until my boys refuse point blank to work. . . . D'ye see what Johnson means by his 'no parleying' with strikers? He'll either close down the place, or try to run it with natives."

Heckraft laughed.

"And he has yet to learn that he has got a red-hot socialist to deal with in you. . . . You are in sympathy with the Indians."

"I am," Gommet admitted. . . . "But they're asking too much. The abolition of the poll-tax is only just; but to amend the Immigration Act, and repeal legislation which offends against their religious and marital status, is a tall order. And the full rights of citizenship is out of the question at present in a country like this. . . . But we have these fellows over for our own convenience, and when by their labour they increase our wealth, I contend that in restricting their movements, and treating them as outside the common rights of citizenship, we aren't treating them fairly. . . . And they make good citizens, too," he added. "They are an intelligent, decent people,—in their way."

"I'm glad you conceded the afterthought," Heckraft said.

"Well, of course, their way isn't ours. But what right have we to tax them for living in a country in which many of them have been born? . . . British subjects too. . . . And they're picturesque. Natal would lose half its charm swept of the brilliant colouring of their clothes. The Indian women are a distinct attraction to the country."

"To the tripper, perhaps," Heckraft allowed.

"Man, do you suppose it is only the tripper who possesses the eye to appreciate colour?" Gommet demanded with a seriousness which made his hearer

laugh. "Don't we all admire the flamboyant tree? Well, the Indian women suggest to me the same flamboyancy in human shape. . . . Not that that's any argument in favour of their existence," he added with a wry smile. "And it's beside the question."

He glanced at Heckraft sharply.

"I know you don't agree with me," he said. "You've been wet-nursed by tradition. You stand by the masters,—by the old order of things. I could wish you were not so beastly conservative."

"Oh! there's hope for me," Heckraft answered, smiling. "I keep an open mind on such matters; and I admit I'm learning. . . . Anyway, I'm not siding with capital against labour. But you can't separate the one from the other, you know. . . . They've got to hang together. It's to be regretted when they fail to recognise their mutual dependence."

"I seem to have heard that kind of thing before," returned Gommet. "It sounds to me rather like begging the question. . . . And it doesn't fit this particular crisis. The disaffection among the Indians is a dignified revolt against injustice. It commands respect, in a way. And there's a point which most people in their objection to the settlement of the Indians in this country overlook,—the mutual antagonism between them and the natives. In a country where the overwhelming majority of the black man is a source of increasing danger as we educate him to realise his power, this antagonistic element which, whatever its private sentiment towards us, will always side with the white man against the African, is a distinct asset."

"Yes," said Heckraft doubtfully. "But there are those who question that, and consider the Indian an added menace."

"Well," grunted Gommet, "we are none of us in-

fallible; but I will back my knowledge of the Indian against your authority. You're a babe in regard to this country, Tony, and you sup up knowledge from the newspapers. As though you hadn't learnt by now that our bold, free press hasn't the courage of its opinions. . . . The immorality of party politics is responsible for that."

Mrs. Gommet came in, and put a period to the discussion. She was panting a little as though she had hurried; her face was flushed, and a glitter of excitement showed in her eyes.

"Those Indians!" she breathed.

She advanced to the table, and stood, resting against it, staring at the two men. Gommet looked at her with quick inquiry.

"What's up?" he questioned.

"I know they're planning something." She held up her hand. "You can hear them from here . . . singing and carrying on. I went up to the hotel, and I saw them—swarms of them—chanting and swinging lights and making signs."

"Tcht! . . . The Mohurrum!" Gommet exclaimed, a mingling of irritability and relief in his tones. "You ought to be familiar enough with their religious rites by now. But you were always scared at Indians."

"But it's early for the Mohurrum, isn't it?" she said.

"No. It's in January all right. . . . Seems to me they're always at it, kicking up some holy shindy. . . . Comforts 'em, I suppose."

Mrs. Gommet was manifestly unconvinced.

"We'll be murdered in our beds before you'll believe they are up to mischief," she cried with growing uneasiness. "I don't trust them. . . . I don't like their customs. They're uncanny. I watched them. The women carried braziers out of their

houses and swung them, and the men, naked practically, swayed to and fro and chanted, and touched fire. It was quite dark but for the flaring braziers in their midst. The dark figures against the fire looked murderous."

Gommet laughed.

"One would never think you had been born in this country," he said. "You are as scared as a hare at anything you don't understand. The Indians are safe enough. If it was a Kaffir beer drink you'd have reason to be scared."

"If they're burning the sugar crops, why shouldn't they burn this plantation?" she said.

"They might, of course."

Gommet left his seat and slipped an arm round her shoulders reassuringly. The small, frightened face appealed to his sense of protection; it was so pathetically wretched and helpless.

"Don't you worry," he said. "They're not out for anything worse than destruction of property. . . . And they wouldn't commit such serious damage as they have done if they were tactfully handled. It's the baases who are mostly responsible for the outrages."

Her lip trembled.

"We are such a handful of Europeans. . . . They could murder us easily, and no one would even know."

Heckraft joined in the discussion.

"Come! Mrs. Gommet," he said. "Don't lose sight of your good sense. They aren't going to ruin their cause for the sake of a petty revenge. It wouldn't profit them to do for the lot of us. Besides, there isn't any personal animus in the case."

"You're like Joe," Mrs. Gommet returned. "You trust the Indians. But coloured people aren't to be

relied upon. . . . Why, only this morning Tapetu called me his mother."

Gommet broke into a laugh.

"That's a bad sign," he admitted. "Now you speak of it, my greaser to-day addressed me as 'his father and his mother.' The compliment of the dual relationship usually signifies that you are going to be badly done."

"What did I say?" Mrs. Gommet cried excitedly. "The last time that happened you lost your scarf pin. . . . If the hands strikè, what will you do?"

"Enjoy a well earned holiday, I hope," Gommet answered easily. "But don't you worry, little woman; that good time isn't coming."

"Mambersad has gone," she reminded him,—"and Rudgubadi."

Gommet removed his arm from her shoulder and walked away.

"That was a different matter," he answered. "They weren't plantation hands."

"They were indentured Indians," she returned quickly. "They hadn't any right to leave."

"No, they were not indentured," he corrected, seating himself. "As for rights, when a servant makes up his mind he wants to go, one is usually jolly well glad to be rid of him. In this instance, they didn't ask permission, they simply went."

"They've followed Gandhi," Mrs. Gommet asserted.

"Probably."

Gommet reached for his pipe and started to clean it. Heckraft, who was leaning out of the open window, drew in his head and looked round.

"Come and listen, Mrs. Gommet," he said. "It really sounds awfully fine, this singing."

Mrs. Gommet leaned on the sill beside him; her shoulder touched his arm. It may have been that

the contact gave her greater confidence, or perhaps the sound of the chanting voices, floating towards them on the still night air, was less alarming than the near sight of the mysterious swaying forms had been: she smiled as she leaned at the open window, listening to the combination of many voices singing in the distance the unfamiliar music of an alien race.

"It would sound well on the violin," Heckraft said.

She looked up at him swiftly and nodded, but she did not speak.

XXVII

THE trouble among the Indians on the plantation, although Gommet, following his principle of bringing his wall-eye to bear upon the situation, refused to admit it, was working to a head. It did not break out all at once: it fermented, and died down, and burst forth again sporadically like some festering evil which, while not incurable, is difficult to subdue. Gommet daily ignored these signs, and Heckraft took his cue from the engineer.

The Indians had worked under Gommet for years. They understood and respected him. Had Gommet been owner his boys would not at the eleventh hour have joined the strikers; as it was, they did so reluctantly, moved by a spirit of self-sacrifice for the good of their race in Africa, whom the Government, to which they looked for protection, as subjects of the Empire, was treating unfairly. Their sense of justice, of security, was rudely disturbed.

The strike on the plantation started in Gommet's household. Tapetu, the cook-boy, and his wife, Ntopi, who filled the vacancies made by the flight of Rudgubadi and Mambersad, showed the first signs of open rebellion. Ntopi absented herself one morning on the plea of sickness, and Tapetu, having explained his wife's indisposition, set about the performance of her duties and his own with the sullen manner of a man preoccupied in mind, and indifferent as to the results of his efforts. As a consequence the break-

fast was not a success. Later in the morning while he was engaged in clearing the table, Mrs. Gommet unwisely found fault with his cooking.

"The porridge was burnt, Tapetu," she complained. "The baas couldn't eat it."

Tapetu paused in his occupation and looked at her with a baleful fire in his keen dark eyes.

"This cook-boy," he said in tones of dignified resentment, "will no cook this porridge. To-morrow this missis can cook this porridge. . . . Every day this missis can cook this porridge. . . . Me, I no cook any more."

Mrs Gommet lost her temper and scolded him.

"Don't you give me cheek, Tapetu," she cried. "I will tell the baas, and he will speak to you."

She held a bunch of keys in her hand, and in her agitation, which was due to fear of the man as well as anger, she swung the keys by their string and set them jingling noisily.

"The eggs were hard," she said, "and the porridge was spoilt. It is disgraceful."

"This cook-boy," he repeated, and his manner lost in dignity as he became more excited and talked with greater rapidity, "will no cook. This missis can cook . . . every day this missis can cook. This cook-boy no cook. . . . This cook-boy is a good boy . . . he will no cook any more. . . ."

"Oh! be quiet," almost screamed Mrs. Gommet, and in her anger she swung her bunch of keys swiftly and caught him with them on the shoulder. The assault was not premeditated, and immediately that she had struck him she regretted the act. The result was alarming. Tapetu dropped where he stood as if he had been shot, and squatting on his heels, rocked himself violently, and howled like some wild beast sorely injured. The noise he made was deafening.

Mrs. Gommet stared at him in amazed inadequacy. But that she feared he would follow and kill her, she would have fled from the room. She kept her head, despite the fact that she felt every ounce of courage oozing out of her.

"Be quiet!" she cried fiercely. . . . "Be quiet! How dare you make that noise?"

The howls of Tapetu gained in volume. He fairly bellowed. Mrs. Gommet, frightened, but firm, with the desperate courage of despair, took a step nearer to him.

"Be quiet!" she exclaimed authoritatively. "If you don't stop that noise at once, I'll hit you again."

With the agility of a panther, Tapetu sprang to his feet and faced her, his eyes blazing with passion.

"If this missis does that," he cried dramatically, "I go kitchen . . . I take knife. . . ." He made rapid pantomime with a long brown finger of drawing a knife across his throat, and rolling up his eyes till only the whites were visible, he let forth a blood-curdling sound between his teeth. "Cr-r-r-r-rk! . . . I go God plenty quick."

Mrs. Gommet was disconcerted, her knees shook under her, but still she kept her head. It would never do to let this man suspect her terror of him,—and it was terror,—blind, unreasoning fear.

"All right," she said,—"go kitchen. . . . Plenty knives in kitchen. . . . Don't wait. . . . Go now."

Without a sound he turned and left the room, and Mrs. Gommet's spirit sunk almost as speedily as it had risen at sight of his departure. Suppose he should take her at her word? . . . What should she do, alone in the house with—*that?* . . . And what a horrible mess it would make in the kitchen. . . .

She listened for sounds, but no sounds followed; the silence seemed almost as ear-splitting as Tapetu's

howls had been. It got upon her nerves. Was the man there, or had he left the house? And, if he was there, why was it all so silent? . . . so still? . . . like a house of the dead. . . .

Her limbs shook under her. She was badly frightened. Her nerves were giving way. She wanted to scream, and dared not, for fear of breaking the horrible silence. Slowly, walking on tiptoe, she advanced to the window and tottered out on to the stoep. To her joyful surprise she saw Heckraft walking in the centre of the road, going towards the lumber sheds. The colour stole back to her white cheeks, and some of the horror in her eyes died down. She waved to attract his attention. Then the silence snapped abruptly, and she called to him.

"Tony!" she cried desperately. "Tony!"

He saw by her manner that something was wrong, and quickening his steps, ran up to the stoep. She swayed towards him. He put out his arm and caught her under the impression she was going to fall. Mrs. Gommet clung to him, and saved herself from fainting by bursting into tears. The relief of tears was tremendous, but the flood had a disconcerting effect upon Heckraft.

"Steady on!" he said soothingly. "Steady on!"

Mrs. Gommet suddenly began to laugh; between laughter and tears she was verging on the hysterical; but the feel of the strong arm supporting her, and the sight of the strong, perturbed face regarding her with kindly concern, helped her to keep her mental balance to some extent, and having indulged her tears for a few minutes, she dried her eyes and withdrew from the comforting shelter of his arm.

"If you hadn't come just when you did," she said, "I should have died of fright."

"Oh! not as bad as that," he replied. . . . "What's wrong, anyway?"

"That dreadful cook-boy!" she cried. . . . "Oh! Tony, I believe he has made a horrible mess in the kitchen."

Heckraft looked at her curiously. Probably he considered that she was still too unstrung to be collected. Her explanation certainly was disproportionate to her alarm.

"Look here!" he said. "You stay where you are, and I'll go and see. I'll kick him out—shall I?"

She laughed again, weakly.

"If he's decapitated himself, you won't be able to," she replied.

Heckraft left her and went inside to investigate. The half-cleared breakfast-table in the sitting-room, and a general disorder of things in the kitchen was all that met his gaze. Tapetu had departed, leaving as evidence of his presence there that morning a crimson stain on the otherwise spotless floor, where, before leaving, as a sign of contempt, he had ejected a thin stream of red juice from the beetel nut he had been chewing. He had spat on the floor in his wrath, and shaken the dust of the place off his feet. Heckraft removed the insolent token of the cook-boy's contempt for the missis who had outraged his sense of dignity before he returned to Mrs. Gommet to assure her of Tapetu's departure.

"He's cleared," he said. "You won't be troubled with him again. Shall I send you a younger boy?"

She shivered at the suggestion.

"I won't have another Indian in the house," she declared. "They are treacherous and vindictive. I'd rather do my own work for ever than be waited on by Indian servants. The Kaffirs are bad enough, but they are not so horribly intelligent."

She recounted for his benefit the scene with Tapetu. For the life of him he could not help laughing at the dramatic recital, which lost nothing in effect by Mrs. Gommet's telling.

"And then Joe says our boys aren't in league with the strikers!" she said. She looked up at him swiftly. "You know they are—although you side with Joe."

He made no immediate answer. He could not contradict her; she was right; the signs of discontent were unmistakable. He did not share Gommet's belief that they would be able to quell the *emeute* before it swelled to open rebellion.

"Perhaps you are wise just now," he said, "not to have a fresh Indian in the house. They are a little out of hand. We'll help with the work after hours. I'm not exactly a skilled butler, but I can wash dishes all right."

She laughed.

"I'd love to see you doing it," she said.

Heckraft started his duties there and then by helping to clear the breakfast-table, then he left Mrs. Gommet to the washing-up and went on to the works.

He was a little uneasy in his mind about Mrs. Gommet. He possessed the inherent masculine prejudice against the presence of women where a possibility of disturbance threatened; the thought of her alone in the house, although Gommet was not far away, was oddly disturbing. Later, he suggested to Gommet the advisability of sending her to the hotel. But Gommet apprehended no danger from the Indians, and Mrs. Gommet preferred to remain in her home. She rather enjoyed housekeeping under the novel conditions, and in the evenings, when Tony and her husband removed the supper things from the sitting-room and bore them into the kitchen, where

they washed them and stacked them on the dresser in business-like fashion, she treated the whole thing as an amazing joke. While the coffee, which Heckraft insisted upon making every night, was the best, she averred, that she had ever tasted.

Mrs. Gommet was in her rightful element. She enjoyed being watched over with the surreptitious protectiveness which both her husband and the manager practised, deluding themselves into believing that they successfully concealed their anxiety from her. They fussed unobtrusively over her of an evening, and relieved her of many small duties. It troubled Gommet that his wife should have to work. He knew how uncongenial to her household drudgery was. But under existing circumstances, the drudgery was lightened for her by her sense of the romantic. She was living in a world of her own making for the time, and playing to the gallery amused her. Her fear of the Indians was less assertive when she was not brought into contact with them; and she had a confident feeling that if real danger were imminent Heckraft, as well as her husband, would protect her with his last breath. That she was selfishly increasing their responsibilities by remaining did not occur to her.

One evening, shortly after Tapetu's defection, Gommet brought his wife a note from Alieta when he came in from work. She was in the kitchen preparing their tea-supper, so he laid the note on the table and went into the bedroom to wash. It was still lying where he had left it when he re-entered the sitting-room. He heard his wife chatting with Heckraft, who had come in after him, and was now following his usual custom of helping to carry in the supper things. Mrs. Gommet appeared to be in high spirits, and she was affecting Heckraft with her mer-

riment. Their laughter drew Gommet to the kitchen. He carried the note with him.

"For you," he said, giving it to his wife as he entered.

She turned, and fork in one hand and frying-pan in the other, surveyed him with a faint contraction of the brows.

"Van der Vyver brought it in this afternoon. It's from Alieta," he explained.

Heckraft relieved her of the frying-pan.

"I'll finish this while you attend to your correspondence," he said.

Mrs. Gommet hesitated before opening her letter.

"They're cooked," she remarked, glancing at him over her shoulder. "I was just about to take them up."

She tore the envelope open slowly, while Heckraft turned the chops out on a dish, giving a divided attention to what he was doing and to the note in her hand.

Mrs. Gommet rather resented the fact that Alieta, for whom she no longer entertained a kindly feeling, should have started a correspondence. It looked rather as though there was something in what Joe had said relative to her partiality for Tony; she was apparently desirous of continuing the friendship, which, Mrs. Gommet decided, pointed to an attraction greater than Alieta's regard for herself.

"It's an invitation," Gommet observed, with the manner of a man who believes he is imparting agreeable information.

"Yes." Mrs. Gommet continued to frown slightly as she read the brief, friendly epistle. "She asks me to go out to the farm for a while."

"Well," Gommet said cheerfully, "that's all right, eh?"

Mrs. Gommet glanced coquettishly at Heckraft.

"How could I go and leave you two boys to muddle along alone?" she demanded.

"Oh! Tony and I could manage," Gommet returned with a laugh.

Heckraft said nothing. He was poking the chops on the dish about with a fork in an attempt to arrange them as he had an idea they ought to be arranged. They wouldn't sort themselves somehow; they crowded together and lay in an untidy heap.

"Tony, say you couldn't spare me," she pleaded.

Heckraft did not look up from his occupation.

"I intend to be self-sacrificing, and suggest the advisability of your going," he answered, still intent on his job.

She watched him with jealous observance.

"And, if I follow your advice, will you come out and see me—often?"

"Joe will," he replied.

"But you? . . . I asked you."

"I never go there," he answered quietly. "The old people don't like me, and they make it sufficiently obvious to warn me off."

"It's excusable. . . . You see, they have a very charming daughter, and you are only a poor man, Tony."

"I can't flatter myself that that is their reason," he returned, "since Miss Van der Vyver is already engaged."

"So you have heard that?" Mrs. Gommet exclaimed in surprise.

"I have it on the very best authority," he said, and abruptly ended the conversation by lifting the dish of chops and transporting them to the next room.

Mrs. Gommet looked after him reflectively. She had forgotten the invitation to Odsani; she had for-

gotten the presence of her husband, till he reminded her of both by commenting on the kindness of the Van der Vyvers in asking her over there until the present disturbance subsided.

"You'll go, of course?" he said.

Her eyes wandered back to his face.

"I have no intention whatever of leaving home," she said.

XXVIII

GOMMET, bending over his engine, looked up sharply as a figure darkened the doorway, and oil-feeder in hand, greeted the appearance of Heckraft with an astonishing flow of bad language. Heckraft, unmoved by the sulphuric epithets, entered and sat down on a sack of bark.

"I thought you might be feeling that way," he said. "I came down to see."

He glanced about him. At the far end of the long building, in the room partitioned off for the engine which ground the maize into meal, two Indians, one a youngster, were pursuing their usual task with an air of impassive detachment. There was no sign of anyone else about. But the machinery for cutting up the bark was working, from which it was to be deduced that other Indians were at work on the upper floor.

"Things a bit slack?" he remarked.

Gommet put down the oil-feeder and wiped his perspiring brow.

"Slack!" he grunted. "I'd like to hamstring every mother's son of them. There's one boy to feed the cutter, and not a blankety Coolie to attend to the engines. We shan't get a third of a morning's work done."

"One boy at the cutter ought to be enough, considering there is no one to bark the trees. You can't cut up bark if the supply fails," Heckraft answered with easy philosophy.

Gommet scrutinised the speaker closely.

"Your boys struck?" he asked.

"Mafuza still sticks to his job, with about a dozen others."

Gommet's expression was gloomy.

"That's bad," he said. "Mafuza leads the gang like a flock of sheep. His working is only a blind."

"So I thought. I called in on my way to the station to let you know I was going to send the information through."

"Yes. I suppose it'll have to come to that."

The engineer's tone was as lugubrious as his face. He hated to have to acknowledge defeat.

"Silly jackasses!" he muttered. "What good is it going to do them? The loss to Johnson will be such a flea-bite that he'll enjoy giving them a lesson by sacking the lot. This farm is more by way of an experiment with him. It only just pays anyhow. . . . I wish it was our own strike, Tony, on our own land."

"I don't," Heckraft answered. "Strikes aren't a hobby of mine. They're bad enough in the old country; they're a menace to public safety out here. And it's absurd for these fellows to imagine they can fight the government. . . . They've everything to lose."

Gommet acquiesced.

"Look here, Tony," he said abruptly, "you hold your hand a bit. I'm going to have a talk with Mafuza. . . . Let me give the poor devils a last chance. I can't see my boys deliberately cutting their own throats without trying to prevent it. . . . I've got more influence than you; I've known them longer. Once you let the puppy meddle in this, the game's up."

Heckraft, though he had no doubts as to the issue, was not difficult to persuade. If Gommet believed

there was the smallest chance of making his boys hear reason, he was more than willing that he should have the opportunity he asked for; but it was a forlorn hope, in his opinion, and foredoomed to failure. The strongest European influence when it came in contact with the fanatical Indian mind was very limited.

In the end, Gommet had to admit himself beaten; and so eventually the news was telegraphed to Durban that the Indians on Johnson's plantation had struck. The strike was general. Not an Indian was at work when the message went through.

Johnson, senior, sent for his son when he received the news. He pushed the telegram across to the younger man without comment, and continued dictating to a stenographer, as he had been doing when young Johnson entered. A gleam, expressive both of satisfaction and annoyance, shone in Harold Johnson's eyes while he read the message. Then he laid the form down on the desk before him.

"As usual," he said, "your manager allows the worst to happen before he condescends to inform us."

He waited until his father paused in his dictation, then he added:

"Had we known earlier, this might have been averted."

The stenographer left the room. Mr. Johnson sat back in his seat, and gave his attention to the matter in hand.

"I doubt it," he said. "But we'll make a change if you like. Rath wants to offer Heckraft the management of the Ringhals estate. It means a bigger screw as well as other advantages, and I don't feel inclined to stand in his light."

Harold Johnson scowled.

"We couldn't recommend him to Sir George as a thoroughly efficient man," he objected.

"Sir George pretty well knows his qualifications," was the reply. "And there's nothing against him. Besides, he'll have an assistant manager. It will suit better all round. I mean to dock the salary in future. The pay is in excess of the work, and the profit the farm yields."

Young Johnson, who shared his father's commercial shrewdness, without which shrewdness millions are seldom acquired, concurred with this. If wages are not paid in proportion to profitable returns they must in all cases fall with a decrease in profits. That was business, as he understood it.

The older man returned to the affair of the strike.

"I haven't time for this," he said, tapping the telegram on his desk. "I'm going to hand it over to you. You'll act as you think fit,—and take full responsibility. . . . The only bit of advice I give you is to remember that in public affairs men don't allow their private animosities to intrude."

He leaned forward as the telephone bell rang at his elbow and took up the receiver. Johnson hesitated a moment before leaving.

"You give me a free hand?" he asked.

"Absolutely."

The young man turned quickly and left the office, the anticipation of stirring events to follow lighting his eyes with a glint of pleasurable excitement. He would show the beggars how little he regarded strikers, and he would instruct Gommet, and the prig of a manager, in the way to treat niggers who refused to work. If Heckraft presumed to interfere, he would give him a dressing down in front of his boys. Almost he hoped that Heckraft would interfere so that he might publicly humiliate him.

Outside the office he ran into Muriel Rath, and inflated by a sense of the importance of the task devolving on him, he could not refrain from dilating upon the gravity of the situation he was called upon to settle to this appreciative listener.

"I'm just off to Drummond," he said. "Our Coolies have struck. The manager appears to have lost his head, and having got things into a mess, wires to us for help. The governor wants me to go up and settle matters."

She regarded him with a mingling of admiration and concern. It was plain that she considered him brave, and his mission hazardous in the extreme.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, and paled with anxiety for his safety. "You won't go alone?" she urged. . . . "Father says the Indians are in a highly excited state. There's been loss of life already, you know."

He laughed at her fears.

"I'll excite them," he said. "Pretty state of affairs when niggers start striking, and demanding their rights."

"They're not niggers," she said.

"It's all the same," he argued. "The next thing will be an organised strike among the natives. That sort of thing can't be tolerated. We've got to put it down."

"You won't be rash, Harold," she pleaded.

"Come!" he said, smiling down on her. "You wouldn't worry overmuch if anything happened to me, would you? It would mean merely a partner less at dances,—a thinning of the crowd by one. I don't believe you would shed a single tear."

She looked so very like shedding tears there and then that he ceased his teasing, and added comfortingly:

"There isn't any need for anxiety. I'll be back before you realise that I've gone. I know how to handle these fellows all right. . . . The governor is quite satisfied to leave the control of everything with me."

He was so youthful in his bumptiousness that anyone but Muriel Rath would have felt amused; she, however, took him seriously, and was properly impressed with his qualities of courage, and his business acumen. Her eyes were big with respectful admiration.

"I know he thinks an awful lot of you," she said.

"I'm not so positive as to that," he answered modestly. "But he's quite comfortable in his mind about leaving this business in my hands. He knows I enjoy a bit of a scrap."

"When do you go?" she asked.

"Immediately. I'm just off home to get the car and a few necessaries."

She was silent a while, twirling the handle of her parasol, and looking away from him along the sunny, crowded pavement.

"I wish you weren't going," she said presently. "I feel ——"

She broke off abruptly, and her eyes came back with shy wistfulness to his face, a foreshadowing of trouble in their depths.

"You might get hurt," she murmured.

It was not in Harold Johnson to resist an opening of this nature. He took advantage of the stream of passers-by to press closer to her side.

"Would you care?" he asked softly.

"Yes."

Muriel Rath became *gauche* when her emotions were excited; she could never rise to such moments artistically. The blunt monosyllable damped his gal-

lantry. He experienced a feeling of boredom, and immediately shifted his ground.

"If our manager wasn't an ass it wouldn't be necessary for me to go," he observed acrimoniously, and then recollecting that the manager was a friend of her father he sheered away from the topic altogether, and shortly after parted from her, dissatisfied on the whole with the interview, and classing her in his thoughts as a simpleton whom he could not altogether dislike because of her genuine admiration for himself. That, so far as he could determine, was the only sign of intelligence she displayed.

It was not until he was half way to Drummond that he remembered Mrs. Gommet. In the hurry and excitement of the morning he had not taken into consideration the fact of Mrs. Gommet's return to her husband's home. It would be awkward, deuced awkward, he decided, if they chanced to meet. This thought worried him considerably. Why had he been such a fool as to assist in the ridiculous reunion of two people so extremely unsuited? He had hoped to further his own ends in thus ridding himself finally of a mistress who had ceased to please him, and from whom he had been vainly trying to break away ever since Alieta had come into his life. The return to her husband had seemed to him to offer an easy solution of the difficulty. But he had to admit now that he had overreached himself in the selfish irresponsibility with which he had thought to fling off an encumbrance. He had removed a millstone from about his neck, and it had assumed the proportion of a veritable mountain in his path.

The thought of Mrs. Gommet took away considerably from the satisfaction he had felt in his present undertaking. He did not fear any number of discontented Indians, but he was horribly afraid of the little woman

whom, at the age of twenty, he had passionately adored, and had since carelessly discarded like a toy which has served its purpose, for what he vainglori-ously styled the grand passion of his life. But such men have only one grand passion, the object of which is self.

He had purposed staying at the hotel at Drummond as more convenient. He wanted to be on the spot. Now he determined to go on to Inchanga; distance was no great consideration when a man has his own motor, and there would be less chance of awkward encounters if he were a few miles away. Besides, it would be handy to Odsani, and he had every in-tention of visiting Alieta in defiance of the other wom-an's jealous strictures. It was primarily the hope of seeing Alieta, and of recovering the ground which he felt he had lost, that had made him so eager to under-take this job. He meant to make a long business of it. He could stretch it over several days without ex-citing his father's suspicions as to his purpose in lin-gering. He understood perfectly that in entrusting the matter to him, his father was but following his principle of treating his engagement, as he had said he should treat it, as though he knew nothing of it, as though, in short, there was nothing to know. He simply ignored it.

None of these reflections were particularly sooth-ing to Johnson. Everything conduced to make his courtship an uphill task. Even the woman he loved, who ought to have helped him along the journey, held back from him, inaccessible and distant, stand-ing at the summit of the steep path set about with its many obstacles, watching his difficult advance with-out once leaning towards him with helping encourag-ing hands. . . . But he would reach her. On that point he was very positive. He would hold her to her

promise in spite of what she had told him. He believed that it was due alone to Heckraft's treachery that she was weakening in her allegiance to him. When she was married to him she would have to make up to him for that. In any case, if she heard certain rumours concerning him later there would be a balance on her side to equalise matters. After their marriage he would get some of his own back.

Working along these lines for a while, his mind took a pleasanter turn. But only for a time. When the hills broke upon his vision as the car climbed the steep road, and the scent of the golden crowned wattles lining their slopes was wafted to him on the hot still air, the vision of Alieta retreated, became elusive and inaccessible once more, and the faded prettiness of Mrs. Gommet, recalled by the surroundings in which he had first seen her,—from which he had taken her, because she hated, as he hated, the acrid, overpowering perfume of the trees when they were in full bloom, occupied once again the foreground of the picture,—dominated it,—filled the entire canvas to the blurring and obliteration of everything else. And the face of Mrs. Gommet, as it impressed itself upon his imagination, wore always the bitter, resentful look he had seen on it when he had tried to make her understand, and accept in a reasonable spirit, the fact that he had ceased to care for her.

XXIX

JOHNSON stopped at Drummond and spent some hours there. He held unsatisfactory interviews with Gommet and Heckraft at the hotel. He also sent for Mafuza, who, rather to Gommet's surprise, attended upon him promptly.

Mafuza's deportment was in admirable contrast in its dignity and restraint to Johnson's overbearing, high-handed way of showing his authority. But his manner was baffling in its non-committal reticence. He threw out his dark hands in a wide gesture that repudiated all responsibility for what the three men, listening to his guarded replies to all questions relative to the crisis, were fully aware he had been chiefly instrumental in bringing about.

Mafuza was a courteous and intelligent Indian, a born leader, and like most of his race, extraordinarily secretive. To all Johnson's blustering threats he would only repeat what was familiar to everyone—the Indians had a grievance: they looked to the Government to redress their wrongs; until that was done they refused to work. He had talked to them. . . . There was no use in talking. . . . They demanded the rights of citizenship, and the removal of the poll-tax. The former was an old grievance, the latter a later and greater indignity. As subjects of the Empire they resented being taxed for living in any part of the Empire's dominions, and from being restricted in their movements from province to province.

Johnson swore at him. Did he suppose the Government was to be dictated to by swine? He had a jolly good mind to kick him for his damned insolence. It was cheek, monstrous cool cheek, to come to him with a tale like that.

"Get out of this," he shouted. "Get back to your quarters. I give you till noon to-morrow to make up your minds. If every blessed Coolie isn't back at work by twelve o'clock, you can tell them from me they had better look out for their skins. Now clear out, before I kick you out."

"It isn't any use talking to them like that, Mr. Johnson," Gommet said in a disgusted voice, as Mafuza backed from the presence, not out of respect for his angry employer, but as a precautionary measure. "A Kaffir might swallow that sort of thing, but an Indian won't."

Johnson swung round on the speaker fiercely.

"It's you, and men like you, who teach these scum disrespect for the white man," he said. "When I want your advice how to treat Indians, I'll ask for it."

To Johnson's further annoyance, Heckraft here turned upon his heel and left the room. The manager felt that unless he was prepared to answer a charge for assault he was safer outside,—he could not remain in Johnson's presence and keep his hands off the man. But Gommet, being less heady, stuck his ground with immense unconcern.

"Call him back," said Johnson curtly. "I've not finished. . . . I have work for him."

In spite of the discouraging manner in which his former advice had been received, Gommet offered a further suggestion.

"I'd leave him alone, if I were you," he counselled drily.

Johnson flushed, and glared in baulked annoyance

at the door which the manager had closed upon his retreat. Presumably, he saw the discretion of this advice, for he did not persist. He looked back sourly at Gommet.

"It seems as if the strike were not confined to the Indians," he said.

"It's spreading, I think," Gommet allowed.

Johnson, pondering this darkly for a moment, finally let it pass. He recognised that if he wanted the assistance of these men—and he did want it—he would have to climb down.

"Look here," he said abruptly, "it's dry work talking. . . . What'll you drink?"

"Not for me, thanks," Gommet answered.

"You're breaking out in a fresh place," the other sneered. "Turned teetotal?"

"Not exactly. But I'm under a promise to the wife not to drink before sundown."

This reference to Mrs. Gommet was distasteful and disconcerting to the younger man. He moved sharply, and again abruptly shifted the talk.

"What do you think about the chances of the boys returning to work to-morrow?" he asked.

"I don't think anything about it," Gommet replied. "I'm dead certain they won't."

"I propose getting a gang of boys from Umlaas," Johnson explained,—"or Umkimaas. . . . I want Heckraft to see to it. We don't take back strikers."

"It's no use Heckraft undertaking to procure natives; he can't speak Kaffir," Gommet returned.

Johnson glanced at him quickly.

"You can?" he said.

"Not enough for that job," Gommet replied with unmistakable firmness.

There was no misunderstanding him. His hearer frowned heavily.

"You're for working against me," he said sharply.

"Not quite that," was the steady answer. "But I'm not working with you in a deal with natives. . . . It won't answer, anyway. Get a gang of raw natives here, and we'll have to teach them their work. That's not good enough. . . . at least, not for me."

Johnson's temper got out of hand at this.

"I think we'd be happier apart," he said. "You'd better find a more suitable billet,—for it's certain this place will be run with native labour. . . . If you don't like that, we must come to some arrangement that will suit both sides. I'm going to Umlaas,—myself—now. . . . I'll have a gang of boys by to-morrow ready to take on."

Gommet, listening, fully confident that the speaker would be as good as his word, was moved to a reluctant admiration. All that energy and determination and push directed into the right channels would be admirable, he reflected; misused, as it was by a man utterly lacking in control, it was merely annoying.

"All right," he said. "I don't mind if I do make a change. It has been in my thoughts of late."

"We'll speak of that later," Johnson said with a scowl. "For the present, I'd have you bear in mind that I look to you to back me up. . . . You'd better talk to Heckraft about that too. I'm not sure where his sympathies lie."

"If you mean you're afraid he'll side with coloured men against his own breed, you can put that idea away," Gommet returned with sharp assurance.

It was no use getting angry with a man like that, he decided later. It was due to the quality of his own mind that he could impute such crooked tendencies to others.

Johnson left in his car in a whirl of dust and furious energy. He had a hard day's work before him,

work in the carrying out of which, if he had no hindrance to fear—and he was not satisfied that he had none—he recognised that at least he could not depend on outside help.

His energy was as remarkable as was his imperviousness to discouragement.

It was not until the light fell that he rested from his labours; then, satisfied on the whole with his day, he returned to his hotel at Inchanga, and having changed and dined, set out on foot for Odsani.

Alieta was less surprised at seeing him than he had expected. Knowing of the trouble on the plantation, she had been looking to see him in their neighbourhood for days,—looking for, and dreading his advent.

Her reception of him was not encouraging. She held him off when he would have taken her in his arms. This refusal of his caress infuriated him.

"Still appearing in that rôle?" he sneered. "I thought I had given you time to get over that. . . . But no doubt you've been putting in the period during my absence in flirting with Heckraft."

"I have not seen Mr. Heckraft since I saw you last," she returned coldly. "Your accusation is unpardonable."

Some quality in her bearing brought him to his senses; his bullying manner fell from him; he became a suppliant and at her feet once more.

"Alieta," he said pleadingly, "forgive me. I'm beside myself, and scarcely know what I say. . . . Why are you so hard, dear love? God knows how I hunger for a kind word from you. . . . And after all these weeks, not even a kiss! . . ."

Alieta turned away from him. She seated herself, and rested an elbow on her chair-arm, and supported her chin on her hand.

"I can't, Harold," she said. . . . "If you knew! . . . Oh! if you could only understand! . . ."

"But—good God!—" he cried desperately, "what is there to know? . . . You gave yourself to me. . . . Didn't you love me then?"

"I thought I did," she answered slowly.

"Thought!" he almost shouted, and added scornfully, forgetful that he too had once thought he truly loved a woman whom now he hated. "One doesn't think about these things,—one *knows.*"

"Yes," she said, sadly; "I have learnt that."

"You mean," he said with savage bitterness, "that you know you don't care for me since you have met Heckraft?"

For a full minute there was silence in the room, and then Alieta answered in a voice that was scarcely a whisper:

"I don't wish to hurt you, but—I mean that."

He went to her and caught her shoulder in a grip that was vice-like.

"You've told him—that?" he muttered.

"No." She looked away from him, and her lip trembled. "There is nothing between us," she said. . . . "There can never be anything—while you are there."

"I see."

He released her shoulder, and sat down at the table opposite her, and leaned his arms upon it.

"And you still want me to release you?" he asked in a hard voice.

She did not look at him.

"I want you to release me," she answered.

"And then you'll go to Heckraft?"

His tones cut like steel. Alieta sunk her face lower on her hand, and struggled for a while for composure. When she could trust her voice she answered him.

"A woman doesn't go to a man," she said.

"Not when she's confident he will come to her, I suppose."

She disregarded the sneer.

"I am not confident," she answered simply. "Mr. Heckraft believes that I love you."

"And so you do," he declared.

Then he broke down. He dropped his face on his arms on the table, and his shoulders shook with his sobs. Alieta, dismayed and astonished beyond words, surveyed in silence this distressful exhibition of weakness in a man whom she had always considered a virile, if not a particularly strong, personality. His break-down moved her to a strange compassion. From the bottom of her soul she pitied him,—this man who at heart was still a boy. It wrung her heart to witness his humiliation and his misery,—to feel that she was the cause of it,—that in her gift lay the power of healing, and that she could not use the gift.

"Oh, don't!" she whispered at last.

She rose and went and stood beside him, laying a hand upon his heaving shoulders.

"Don't! . . . What can I say? . . . What can I do?"

He lifted his wrung and boyish face and stared at her with tear-blurred eyes.

"You could say that you didn't mean it," he answered with a break in his voice. . . . "You might—Oh! Alieta, kiss me,—in God's name! . . . I think I shall go mad."

He dropped his face again, and his shoulders heaved as before with big sobs that shook his great frame as violently as uncontrolled emotion shakes the tender frame of a distressed child.

"You don't care," he mumbled. . . . "You don't care. . . . If you did, you would kiss me."

"It's because I care so much," she answered, "that

I don't do what you ask. . . . Surely only a woman without heart would seek to ease your pain by bestowing a caress that carried no other meaning with it? You don't wish me to be insincere?"

He rubbed his eyes suddenly and sat back, a frustrated expression on his face. He felt angry at what he termed her callousness; he resented her attitude of maternal kindliness which pitied while it did not give way to him. At the moment he hated her superiority.

"You are driving me mad," he said. "You'll drive me to drink,—or the devil. . . . You know that I worship you, Alieta,—that you're the one woman in the world for me. . . . There's nothing for me if you give me the go-by. . . . It'll be the end of all."

She moved abruptly away from him, impatient with him for his weakness, and intolerant of his selfishness which admitted no room for anything save pity for his own condition.

"I should be sorry to believe that you had no more restraint, or self-reliance, than your words would lead one to suppose," she said. "That doesn't promise very well for the future."

"You're as cold as a fish," he grumbled. . . . "It's in keeping with my opinion of your sex. You lead a man on for your own ends; when you've got all you want out of him, you shoulder him out of it as if he didn't count. . . . You've had the best of me. . . . I thought that earth was heaven because you lived on it; and it made a better man of me. Now ——"

He broke off abruptly, and sat still in his chair, staring glumly at the table. Alieta looked back at him, the love which she had for Heckraft rising in her like a flood, softening her breast towards this man whom she had never really loved, drowning all thought of self in a rush of great emotions too big

to admit room for any thought that was selfish or small. Something fell away from her at that moment, and a virtue, begotten of a great love, was born in her with all the pangs and suffering which pregnancy entails. If this man loved her as she loved Anthony Heckraft, what right had she to set him aside, because she had learnt too late what he already knew—what love was?

XXX

THE dwellers in lands of an older civilisation can scarcely appreciate the dangers and difficulties of a strike in undeveloped countries, where many races, and varied racial distinctions, exist and have to be observed. When disturbances arise in such countries there are bigger things to face than merely the distress of disorganisation caused by labour crises in a less cosmopolitan community hedged about and protected by the laws of an ordered society. The big danger in South Africa is always the native, and the native problem must remain a knotty question until the African has left his condition of semi-savagery some centuries behind him. Until that stage of evolution is reached the iron rule cannot with safety be relaxed. Indeed the higher intermediary stages of civilization to which the native has already attained only increase the danger. Education and freer intercourse with the white races breed the competitive instinct in certain minds of a more restless and ambitious tendency than the ordinary; from this class springs the leader who imbues his less enlightened brothers with the spirit of discontent which makes for revolt.

The chief drawback to the present system of rule in young countries peopled by alien races is the power vested in the individual; but that power becomes yearly less and less important. It is, however, a menace to society when it rests with men of Harold John-

son's type, men who have no qualification for ruling because they cannot govern themselves. When Johnson, senior, gave his son a free hand in the matter of the strike, Johnson, junior, felt that it was tantamount to a permission to take the law into his own hands. It was, within limits: so long as no fuss was made as a result of his handling of the difficulty, he knew he would be all right,—and even if there was a bit of a fuss, he argued, his father's influence, and the influence of others, would help him out of the scrape.

He talked the matter over with old Van der Vyver, and Van der Vyver, who held the view of the less advanced Boer, that all such disturbances should be settled promptly with a firm hand and no parleying, agreed with him on the whole; though on the subject of native labour for wattle growing he was distinctly discouraging.

"You might almost as well cease working the plantation," he said.

But Harold Johnson was obstinate, and held to his idea.

He left Odsani early that evening. He had still some matters to attend to, and he had to be up at sunrise. Alieta allowed him to kiss her when he went away. They were seated on the stoep together, and Johnson on rising to take his departure drew her up with him and put his arms about her: as Alieta did not repulse him, he bent his head and kissed her.

"You'll be true to me, Alieta?" he muttered against her lips.

She drew back slightly.

"If you still wish it, yes," she said.

"You know my answer to that," he returned, and caught her to him fiercely, crushing her in his embrace.

"I'll come to-morrow," he said, releasing her with

surprising suddenness, his manner in his excitement jerky and fragmentary. . . . "Daren't stop now. . . . I'll make a fool of myself, if I do. . . . I'll come to-morrow when I'm through with the worst of this business, and you'll hearten and console me,—won't you, dear?"

When he was gone Alieta remained on the stoep alone, leaning with her arms on the rail, looking out on the quiet night. Was this what life meant? . . . Was her awakening womanhood to find its fulfilment in a life lived side by side with this man, with minds out of harmony, and sympathies widely estranged? . . . Could she reconcile herself to the indignity of such a marriage? . . . satisfy her hungry craving for love with the man's unbridled passion for possession which refused to be checked even by her obvious reluctance? . . . She shivered at the prospect of living always with a man whom she now knew she neither loved nor respected. And yet she felt that a greater treachery would be hers if she broke finally with him. A sense of responsibility, more than a sense of honour, held her to her promise; by his miserable break-down he had taken an unfair advantage of her.

Alieta shivered again as she stood in the warm darkness, sadly companioned with her troubled thoughts, and with the pain of a great regret oppressing her soul. She knew now what many a woman—many a man too—has discovered too late, that to accept love lightly inevitably brings its tragic consequences. The moment for her had arrived, and it found her no longer free. . . .

The strong scent of the wattles was wafted to her on the night breeze, full-blossomed and acrid, the fading flowers of a season almost spent. She stepped down from the stoep, and walked forward into the

moonless night, and the stars, gleaming luminously in the cloudless heavens, shone upon a white, set face, and dimly lighted a pair of sorrow-darkened, tearless eyes. . . .

Alieta was not alone in her sorrow. Heckraft too was enduring his dark hour; and for him there was not the consolation of knowing that his love for her was returned. She had denied him the delight with the pain of that knowledge. He pictured her, satisfied and happy, in the company of her lover. He hated the man, but because of his love for Alieta he wished him no ill.

Following his restless mood, he too went forth into the darkness. Inside the house he had felt suffocated. The air was hot, stifling; and Gommet was gloomily silent, Mrs. Gommet nervous and irritable and unstrung. He understood Gommet's moodiness, and sympathised with it. The socialist engineer, who was a friend of his boys, was likely enough to be feeling glum; but Mrs. Gommet's attitude baffled him; he failed utterly to see why she need feel herself to be in particular danger; he considered her fears disproportionate. But, he argued excusingly, she did not know the Indians as he and Gommet knew them; to her they were all like Tapetu, terrifying and incomprehensible, a strange people to be feared and distrusted and never entirely understood.

He wandered further than he had any idea of. When he returned the engineer's house was in darkness; its inmates had gone to bed. He let himself in and struck a match to light himself to the sitting-room. To his amazement while he was engaged in lighting the lamp Mrs. Gommet suddenly appeared in the door-way, with only a wrapper over her night-dress, and her hair in disarray. She looked extraordinarily young and pretty in the uncertain light.

"It's only me, Tony," she said, in low, tremulous tones. "Joe's asleep. I came out to ask you if you had secured the door."

He stared at her, blinking like an owl abruptly confronted with a strong light. Never since he had been with Gommet had they troubled to secure anything.

"I haven't," he answered. "But I will, if you wish it."

He turned as he spoke and went out into the passage. He shot the bolt and then came back. Mrs. Gommet was standing where he had left her, with her hand resting upon the table. Something in her attitude reminded him of Alieta; Alieta had stood very much like that one evening after she had dressed his hand. The familiarity of the pose softened him towards this other woman who in most respects was so utterly different.

"Go back to bed," he said soothingly, "and have no fear. Neither Joe nor I would let anyone harm you."

She drew nearer to him and touched his arm. Her hair brushed his shoulder. He was conscious of the smell of warm, soft flesh as she leaned towards him.

"Joe's asleep—and drunk," she whispered. . . . "Oh! it's good to have a *man* at hand one can depend on at a time like this."

Suddenly at her words, at her touch, perhaps because of that sweet subtle smell of her, a demon rose in the man. She represented for him womanhood, and on that night he was sex-hungry, and hopeless, and miserable. He was primitive man governed by primitive instincts, and the hour and the environment accentuated her natural charm. He seized her hands and crushed them in his. He drew

her to him. She swayed towards him, unresisting. The loosened wrapper fell back; her nightdress was unfastened at the neck, and the long line of her throat, white and graciously full, showed seductively in the lamplight. He seized her roughly. He held her to him, and bending his head, he kissed her madly with hot, impassioned lips. . . .

Then suddenly he remembered. . . . He remembered Alieta, and his love for her,—the love he was dishonouring; he remembered Gommet, the man whose friendship he had won, and whom he respected and liked; and he felt ashamed. What bestial impulse had moved him to set at naught every sense of honour and good-feeling which he had ever known?

"Oh, I say!" he muttered, releasing her. "I don't know what made me do that. . . . I beg your pardon, Mrs. Gommet. . . . Forgive me. . . . I—I think I am not quite myself to-night."

He never quite remembered what happened after that. He had an idea that Mrs. Gommet said something, though he could not recollect what it was; then she had glided out through the door, like a pale ghost flitting in the shadows, and he was left alone in that room of memories, seeing Alieta's face, and hearing her voice, and smelling always that sweet, seductive odour of warm human flesh. . . .

Humanity at the best is but frail, governed by odd, inexplicable impulses which, latent and often unguessed at, lie at the root of our natures.

There was no sleep for Heckraft after that. At sunrise he rose, and saddling his horse, went for a ride. He did not return for breakfast, which in the unsettled state of affairs passed without remark. It was only Mrs. Gommet who suspected the real reason for his absence. She believed that his sense of

the fitness of things made him reluctant to meet her in the presence of her husband. The situation was not without its humorous side for her; and it thrilled her pleasantly to recall the scene of the previous night. Tony was hopelessly in love with her, that was evident. While not actually in love with him, her vanity was gratified to the extent of finding his homage very agreeable, even when it passed the bounds of honourable restraint.

Gommet strolled across to the works during the morning, but there was nothing doing, and before noon he returned to the house. None of the Indians were at work, and Johnson, evidently distrusting him, had sent no word to him of his intentions, nor commanded his co-operation. That on the whole was satisfactory, because he felt little inclination to assist him in his methods of settling the disturbance. Left to themselves, he did not doubt that he and the manager would have weathered this storm at very small loss to the firm. But the firm had taken the matter out of his hands, and, save that he was sorry for his boys, he did not care much what resulted from their action. He felt that it was fairly safe to conjecture that young Johnson would make a hash of things.

"Why don't you go and see what's doing, Joe?" his wife asked him, as the long morning wore uneventfully away. She was restless, as animals are restless before the coming of a storm; his inactivity irritated her.

"Why should I?" he demanded, without looking up from the paper he was reading.

"Tony is evidently in it," was all she said.

"Tony is an officious fool," Gommet answered. "He ought to wait until he is sent for."

Mrs. Gommet pondered this.

"It'll mean the sack for you," she said at last.

"I've got my marching orders already," Gommet replied. "And I'm jolly glad of it. I can work for old Johnson, but I can't stick his cub."

Mrs. Gommet stared at him in wide-eyed amazement.

"Does that mean we shall go to Nooitgedacht?" she asked.

"Yes; it works out at that, I imagine."

"Oh! I'm glad," she cried.

"So am I. But we'll have to go easy for a time. Nooitgedacht is not a paying concern yet."

"I don't care," she said, and added with bitter vehemence,—"I *hate* this place."

He nodded sympathetically. He hated it too. He had brought his young wife there; from there he had lost her. True, she had come back to him; but nothing could wipe out the memory of those five bitter years, years in which it seemed to him all the happiness of his previous life had been wiped out. Those wasted years had left their mark upon his soul.

And then, breaking in upon the silence which had fallen between them, with an intrusive clatter that awoke the drowsy stillness of the sunny noonday, came the sound of thudding hoofs. Gommet looked up swiftly. Mrs. Gommet passed him and went to the window.

"It's Tony," she cried, and stepped out upon the stoep.

Gommet rose, and followed her. Thundering along the dusty road, on the animal that had served him ill on more than one occasion, rode Heckraft. He galloped right up to the house and drew rein abruptly below the stoep. He did not dismount. Dust-soiled and haggard-eyed, he looked up at Gommet, as the

latter leaned down towards him, puzzled and inquiring:

"Turn out, Joe," he cried incoherently. "He's raising Cain. . . . He's for driving every blessed Indian off the place."

XXXI

GOMMET gazed with exasperating coolness at the excited, dishevelled figure of the manager who, from his appearance, might have been up all night and engaged in any desperate enterprise. He was puzzled to think why Tony need mix himself up in the affair, which was no concern of his, after all.

"If the boys won't work," was all he vouchsafed in response, "Johnson is justified from his point of view in turning them off."

"Man, you don't understand," Heckraft exclaimed sharply. "He's ejecting them with violence. He has got a gang of Kaffirs, and they have flogged the boys out from their quarters, and are driving them off the place."

He held up a hand.

"They're coming this way," he almost shouted, heading his horse round smartly. "Somebody ought to stop it; it's a scandal."

"Wait a bit," Gommet called to him. "Are you armed?"

"Armed! No."

"Hold hard, and I'll fetch a revolver. No one who wasn't a born fool would mix himself up in a *mêlée* of this sort without some means of defence."

But whether or no the manager heard him, he did not stop. He turned his horse and galloped off to meet the excited rush of dark, hurrying figures that

swarmed along the dusty road. Behind the straggling procession of Indian men and women and children, whooping and flourishing sticks, followed a crowd of natives with Johnson riding in their midst.

"Fool!" muttered Gommet, and swung round to find his wife standing at his elbow, with frightened, dilated eyes fixed on this surge of angry humanity: every man among them, whether native or Indian, seemed to her to threaten personal and imminent violence.

"You won't leave me, Joe?" she cried, clinging to his arm. "I'm frightened."

"Nothing to be frightened at," Gommet said. "There isn't a boy there would harm you. And they've something else to think about."

He glanced back towards the scene. Heckraft had galloped right into the midst of the stream of gesticulating, hurrying forms. Instantly they closed about him. It may have been that the riding whip he carried roused their suspicions as to his intentions, and excited their ire afresh. For the present the white man was their enemy, and, smarting from the indignity of their recent treatment, they thirsted for revenge. They dragged the manager from his horse. Mrs. Gommet screamed as she saw him flung to the ground, and Gommet, with an oath, dashed into his bedroom and snatched up the revolver he had kept loaded in readiness since the beginning of the disturbance. Carrying it in his hand, he ran out on to the stoep. Mrs. Gommet was staring up the road. The figure of Heckraft was hidden now; the Indians had closed in upon him where he lay in the roadway. But the thing which Gommet saw, the thing which his wife was watching, was the amazing inactivity of the hitherto aggressive party. Johnson had called a halt, and he, surrounded by his wondering

Kaffirs, was watching the scene and making no attempt to interfere.

"Good God!" cried Gommet. "He's letting them kill him."

At his words, hate leapt into the eyes of the woman, fixed on the big, motionless figure of Johnson, seated negligently in the saddle with loosened rein, the right hand, which grasped a loaded stick, resting upon his thigh. She turned suddenly, with an unaccountable impulse, and touched her husband's arm.

"That is the man who caused my ruin," she said.

She did not know whether he heard her, whether, if he heard, he took in the significance of her words. He brushed past her, and swung himself off the stoep, and ran up the road, bareheaded, his revolver in his hand. Mrs. Gommet saw the sunlight glint on the weapon as he ran, and she wondered vaguely why he did not fire. She saw Johnson's figure stiffen in the saddle as the engineer advanced, and his hand close with spasmodic suddenness on the stick he held. Oddly enough, she no longer felt afraid. She was watching with the detachment of an ordinary spectator the enactment of a drama, and wondering with a thrill of nervous excitement, whether Joe would be in time to save the fallen man from death.

Then the wish came to her amid the confused jumble of thought that she had not parted with that impulsive confidence. She hoped that her husband had not heard. Save when a wrong may be righted through speech, silence is a golden rule. . . .

Her mind swung back again from her own concerns to the immediate present. She became once more acutely alive to the danger of the man lying helpless in the road at the mercy of an angry, excited crowd, which, it seemed to her, watching the press

of dark, swaying figures, was bent on trampling him to death.

And then Gommet reached the scene, not a moment too soon. The human wall opened out to allow him to pass, as dealing heavy blows impartially with an iron fist, he cleared a passage and reached the manager's side.

Mafuza, and a few of the older men, had surrounded Heckraft, and were keeping the press back. With great difficulty they had prevented one or two of the more infuriated Indians, whose dark shoulders smarted from the lashing they had received, from doing the white man to death with their knives.

As the crowd opened out, Heckraft got upon his feet. He was dusty and trampled, but otherwise unhurt. Gommet gave him one look to assure himself on this point, and then briefly harangued the now sullen mob. Gommet understood his boys, and they understood him; not a Coolie among them would have injured the engineer. They listened to him, scowling and defiant, the discontent breaking forth in low mutterings of threats, which he saw fit to ignore. He told Mafuza to lead them on to the station, and promised to meet and parley with them there.

Then, with Heckraft standing at his shoulder, he turned about and faced Johnson, who, cheated of his hope, indeed confident expectation, of seeing his enemy settled finally for him by the foolish mob whose frenzy he had roused, rode forward again, urging his Kaffirs to a renewal of attack. He would show Gommet and the prig of a manager how little their interference counted. If they didn't get out of his path he would ride them down.

But his assurance met with a rude check when he found himself suddenly looking into the barrel of Gommet's revolver. He threw up his right arm in-

stinctively, and swerved his horse to one side; at the same moment, Heckraft, realising Gommet's intention, knocked up the levelled weapon.

"Not that, Joe!" he cried. "It's not worth it."

Gommet tried to shake him off.

"You're white livered. . . . The beast would have seen you butchered," he said, and jerking his arm free, raised the weapon once more. He fired, but the bullet flew wide into the sunny air; a second time, Heckraft, hampering his movements, had spoilt his aim.

Johnson, as he galloped into safety, followed by his disorganised band of Kaffirs, who had not reckoned on the development of European opposition and indiscriminate firing, little guessed that he owed his life that morning to the belief which Heckraft fostered that it was a life Alieta loved. He had spared the man's life because, for that reason alone, it appeared to him valuable.

As the distance widened between him and his enemy, frustrated in his desire for vengeance, Gommet turned savagely on the man who had baulked him, and struck him heavily in the face.

"Blast your interference!" he snarled. . . . "That man ruined my wife."

He wheeled about and left the manager to recover from the shock of this startling intelligence, which had knocked him aback mentally, as greatly as the blow that had laid his cheek open, had staggered him physically. He was quicker to recover his bodily balance than he was to readjust his ideas. Gommet's words hammered in his ears and stunned him. He stared blankly after the lean, retreating figure of the engineer. An odd impulse prompted him to follow after him and apologise for his impertinent blundering; the next moment he realised the ridiculous im-

practicability of that idea, and abandoned it as absurd. He continued to stare along the road. Beyond the engineer, in straggling file, marched the Indians, making for the station, their bare feet stirring up the dust as they walked. Gommet, he observed, passed his house and followed them.

Then, abruptly, his attention was diverted. He became conscious of his hurt, unpleasantly reminded of it by the blood which ran down his face, and splashed into the dust in big drops. He took out his handkerchief and attempted to staunch it.

"Beastly mess," he muttered, aware that the handkerchief was becoming rapidly soaked.

Then, feeling that he must wash off the blood, he walked swiftly back to the house. Mrs. Gommet met him as he entered. He had hoped to get to his room unobserved, being in no mood to suffer questioning or sympathy. He had an idea that she would want to bathe his wound, or would fuss over him in other ways, and he recoiled from the thought of being handled by her. But Mrs. Gommet hated blood. She shrank back at sight of him.

"You're hurt," she exclaimed, giving utterance to the obvious in the manner of one imparting information.

She knew quite well how Heckraft had received the injury. She had been watching and had seen the blow struck.

"It's more showy than important," he returned.

Mrs. Gommet was manifestly curious and ill at ease. She longed to ask him why Joe had dealt him that savage blow. The scene in the road had been so swift of action, so confused and hurried, that she had only imperfectly followed the rapid move of events. But one thing seemed certain: Joe had understood what she had told him; he had attempted to

punish her seducer, and had failed through Heckraft's intervention. How much, she wondered, did Heckraft know or suspect of her past relations with the man whose life he had prevented her husband from taking?

Heckraft went on to his own room. She let him go, and waited in the sitting-room until, after a long while, he came back, washed and clean, with a disfiguring piece of sticking-plaster over his broken cheek, and an eye that appeared to be withdrawing itself from observation behind new and unfamiliar contours that were steadily changing the appearance of one side of his face. She gazed at him, surprised and openly dismayed; the alteration in his appearance almost made a stranger of him; and that haughty, inaccessible, retreating eye, surveying her remotely from behind its fleshy entrenchment, embarrassed her oddly. It seemed to her that that unfamiliar eye was gifted with a keener insight in proportion to its circumscribed range: she felt that it disapproved of her.

"Shall I get you anything?" she asked tentatively, trying to dodge the eye. . . . "Whisky?"

He laughed.

"I'm not so sick as I look," he replied, and felt his swollen face.

She pushed a chair towards him.

"Do sit down. You must be feeling giddy."

He thanked her, and seated himself. He wished that she would go and leave him alone; he wanted to think. Things had happened in such a hurry that he had not had time to adjust his ideas. But it was being borne in upon him with slow and dogged insistence that he was justified, indeed called upon, to make use of the knowledge that had come to him,—been thrust upon him, as it were. He had got his

chance. . . . But had he the moral courage to take it? . . . . It was not a pleasant nor an easy task he contemplated, and, in view of the fact that he loved Alieta, he was not positive that it was strictly creditable either. He felt that it would have been immeasurably easier if he had not cared so much. How can a man, when he loves a woman, tell her ugly truths about another man whom she has admitted to him is dear to her? He was going to hurt her badly, —and yet, if he refrained from hurting her now, she would marry Johnson, and in his opinion that would be a bigger injury in the long run.

"Where's Joe gone?" Mrs. Gommet inquired, breaking in on his train of thought.

He glanced up with quick impatience.

"Only down to the station."

Mrs. Gommet frowned.

"After those horrid Indians, I suppose. . . . I wonder he troubles."

She moved about the room irresolutely, crossed to the window, and then returned to Heckraft's side.

"Tony," she said, with her hand on the back of his chair, "what made Joe do it?"

He started.

"Do what?"

"That," she said, and stretched forth a finger and lightly touched his cheek.

"You saw?" he asked.

"Yes, I saw. I was watching."

"It was done in the heat of the moment," he answered evasively. "He didn't mean it."

"But what made him do it?" she persisted.

"We differed in opinion," he answered. "And I suppose we were both rather excited."

She laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You won't tell me," she returned with gentle re-

proach in her tones. . . . "I believe it had something to do with me."

He looked up at her sharply.

"Well, I rather regard that smack in the face," he replied, "as something I earned. . . . Your husband is a good sort, Mrs. Gommet. You may rest assured that he'll always fight your battles, anyhow."

She looked back at him uncertainly, and was again uncomfortably conscious of the raking power of that nearly closed eye. It was as though he regarded her with one eye shut, the better to focus his vision.

"You're not thinking still about—last night?" she said softly.

"No," he answered; "my part in that was sufficiently discreditable for me to wish to forget it."

"But I wasn't angry—not very," she said.

"In that you display a greater generosity than I deserve," he returned, and Mrs. Gommet fancied that the eye waxed more severe.

He rose with the intention of putting an end to a conversation which he found distasteful in the extreme. Mrs. Gommet, still confident in her vanity, that he was schooling his passion for her from some scruple of honour, and having no such scruples herself, stood in his path.

"Don't you think you are rather quixotic?—just a little foolish," she urged. "What is there in a kiss, after all? . . . I don't suppose Joe confines his kissing to me. . . . I wouldn't wish it. I daresay when she was nursing him he sometimes kissed Alieta."

Heckraft stared at her, his face flushing a dull red.

"I'll venture to assert that he did nothing of the sort," he answered shortly.

Something in the quality of his tone recalled with an unpleasant sense of conviction to Mrs. Gommet's mind her husband's assertion that Heckraft was in

love with Alieta. She met his angry gaze with jealous, questioning eyes, and jerked out at him the abrupt monosyllable:

"Why?"

He pulled himself together, on his guard immediately against self-betrayal, and yet, manlike, unable entirely to suppress his antagonism towards the barest hint of license where Alieta was concerned.

"One doesn't look for cheap sentimentalism from Joe, nor from Miss Van der Vyver," he answered. "You seem to forget how long she was in this house, and how she earned our respect and gratitude. She will always represent for me womanhood at her highest."

"Tony," Mrs. Gommet cried with affected lightness of manner, catching at his sleeve and pulling at it insistently. "I believe that you are in love with Alieta Van der Vyver."

He hesitated for a moment. Against his disinclination to avow the sacred truth to this soulless little being rose the desire to proclaim his passion before all the world; the stronger inclination overruled the lesser.

"Yes, I am," he admitted.

For fully half a minute Mrs. Gommet made no answer. She remained still grasping his arm, staring at him dully. Then she released his coat sleeve, and turned abruptly away.

"Poor Tony!" she said with soft insincerity, and added, after a pause: "I should have been truly glad, only that I know from herself that her love is given elsewhere."

XXXII

WHEN Gommet returned from the station, flushed and weary, he found Heckraft alone in the sitting-room, and, unprepared for the sight of the latter's swollen countenance, surveyed him with comprehending, disconcerted gaze.

"Oh, I say! Did I do that?" he asked.

Heckraft disposed of the matter summarily.

"I got in the way of your fist," he answered. "It's nothing much,—not more than I deserved, anyhow. What did you arrange with Mafuza? You saw him, of course?"

Gommet dropped into a seat and stared about him gloomily.

"I went along for the purpose. . . . He's coming to work for us,—he, and his boys, when the strike's settled. . . . I don't know how it will be with you, but I get chucked over this business, and I'm glad of it. I wouldn't work for Johnson any longer on any consideration. I shall go to Nooitgedacht and work the place up."

Heckraft watched him sympathetically, understanding in a measure what he was feeling.

"I don't think I shall go to Nooitgedacht—yet," he jerked out. "I'm not sure that I shall ever be anything more than a sleeping partner in the place. . . . I'm rather sick of the whole thing."

Gommet looked up in surprise, a certain eager hopefulness in his eyes. He liked Anthony Heckraft, but he was of the opinion that a triangular household

was not altogether a success, and since his wife had returned to him and thereby lessened the expense conditional upon double housekeeping, he felt equal to running Nooitgedacht on his own, and was anxious to make the attempt; only the belief that Heckraft too was keen on the project had made him diffident about proposing the dissolution before. Since Heckraft gave him the opening he was not slow to seize upon it.

"That's as you like, of course," he said quickly. "I'm quite willing to run the place for you, and to buy you out after a decent interval. . . . I rather hustled you into it, if I remember rightly."

"Oh! I don't know about that. I was quite glad of the chance. Only since then, things have happened —I don't know. . . . I don't feel about it as I did."

Mrs. Gommet came in at that moment, and put an end to the talk. She asked innumerable questions, and flitted about incessantly, a restless, purposeless little figure, inventing trivial occupations as an excuse for her lingering. Gommet watched her with grave, meditative eyes. He did not, Heckraft noticed, address a single remark to her, but when she spoke to him he answered with a wonderful tenderness in his tones. Knowing what he did, Heckraft felt an immense respect for, and sympathy with the man.

He slipped out of the room and left husband and wife alone. Then, with no particular aim in view, he set out to walk up the hill, past the deserted wattle plantations where the stripped bark lay drying in the sunshine. He spent many busy, but comparatively futile hours in destroying the cone-shaped nests of the bagworm that hung to the twigs of the trees. In his preoccupation he missed the dinner hour, and having previously missed breakfast, returned at tea-time, weary and hungry, with a highly discoloured, and almost closed eye. But Gommet and his wife had

had their talk out, and the engineer at least was looking happier for it.

Earlier in the day Mrs. Gommet had written, and sent off by special messenger from the hotel, a letter to Alieta. She awaited with secret impatience a reply to that letter, which was in essence a request for Alieta's presence. She felt confident as to the issue. Considering all things, Alieta was not likely to fail her in this.

Alieta answered the letter in person, arriving on horseback the following afternoon at an hour when she judged the men would be out of the way. They were out. Gommet was at the station, sending off high-handed answers to the peremptory messages he received over the wires from Durban, and Heckraft was mooning about aimlessly, trying to kill time. The strike had left him at loose ends, nor had he the satisfaction, which Gommet was experiencing, of indulging a personal animus, and getting some of his own back in return.

Johnson had gone back to Durban to find a capable manager, and someone to take Gommet's place, and work the plantation with Kaffir labour. In the meanwhile Gommet and the present manager were awaiting developments.

Mrs. Gommet, who was on the watch for Alieta, saw her arrive, and ran out to meet her. She held the rein while Alieta dismounted.

"How good of you to come so promptly," she cried. . . . "But I knew you would. . . . And there's nobody to take your horse."

She looked round irresolutely, the reins still in her hand. Alieta took them from her, and hitched them to a limb of a tree.

"It doesn't matter," she said; "I'll be returning shortly."

She slipped a hand through Mrs. Gommet's arm, and walked with her into the house.

"So you are actually servantless?" she said. "How extremely awkward! Will I send old Katje to you? . . . She is equal to a number of less competent maids."

"Of course not," Mrs. Gommet answered quickly, unwilling to lay herself under further obligation to Alieta. "It's kind of you," she added, with a desire not to appear ungracious; "but your mother would not like it. And I can manage. . . . I've been managing without house servants since the trouble began."

"I had no idea," Alieta said, and turned to find the other woman regarding her with a fixed and wondering scrutiny. Mrs. Gommet was trying to puzzle out what there was about this girl which attracted the homage of men, and held it. The secret of Alieta's power was possibly to be explained in that it was unconscious and unsought. "Why didn't you come out to the farm, as I wished?" she asked. "This sort of thing,"—she made a wide gesture with her arm, indicating the strike area with a comprehensive sweep, —"is better left to the men. They are responsible for these muddles, and should be left to settle them."

This was a new view to Mrs. Gommet. She looked at the speaker with undisguised surprise.

"But they can't manage everything," she said. . . . "there's the home, you know."

It ran through Alieta's mind to inquire how the home had fared during its mistress' absence, and since it had gone on during that unhappy period, why it could not continue on similar lines for a further time. But she did not put the thought into words. Instead she said:

"Your husband could have shut up this house and gone to the hotel."

Mrs. Gommet shook her head.

"He wouldn't do that," she answered.

Alieta dropped her riding skirt, and seated herself in a chair near the open window of the sitting-room. She was beginning to wonder why, since Mrs. Gommet rejected all her propositions without even considering them, she should have sent for her, and been so urgent in her request for her presence. Mrs. Gommet did not leave her long in doubt as to her object. She came abruptly to her point. Seating herself facing Alieta, she leaned towards her in a confidential attitude that suggested caution,—a fear of being overheard, though there was no one there to hear.

"It was good of you to come so soon in answer to my letter," she began, and paused, as though undecided how to proceed.

Alieta filled the pause.

"Naturally I came," she returned gently. "You told me you were in great trouble. . . . I don't know whether I am right, but I imagine the trouble to be something apart from the strike."

Mrs. Gommet nodded.

"It is," she admitted.

She hesitated again for a while, and during the waiting silence studied the fair face of her unconscious visitor with a jealous, furtive regard. The freshness of Alieta's beauty, contrasting with her own faded prettiness, incensed her against her anew. Her anger made the present task easier.

"I'm worried," she said suddenly,—"And I want your advice. . . . Joe has fallen out with Tony—Mr. Heckraft, I mean. It came to blows between them yesterday. Joe gave Mr. Heckraft a thrashing."

Alieta looked amazed.

"I must say Tony deserved what he got," Mrs. Gommet added in dry, jerky sentences. She shifted her gaze in order to avoid Alieta's astonished, horrified eyes. "He makes love to me. . . . Though I didn't know that Joe suspected that. . . . The other night he kissed me. . . . It was wrong of him, and I was angry. But I can't think how Joe guessed. . . . I wouldn't have had him know for the world."

She lifted her eyes again. Alieta averted her face. She looked away from the speaker, out at the sunny prospect, with dismayed, unseeing eyes. All her world, her simple beliefs, her ideals, were tumbling about her feet. Her face hardened, became fixed, like a mask. As in a dream she heard Mrs. Gommet saying:

"Men are all alike. I don't know why they are like that, but they are. . . . Some men don't seem able to let a woman alone."

Alieta attempted to digest this logic, but finding it altogether unpalatable, finally rejected it, and shifted the talk from generalities back to a more personal note. Mrs. Gommet's confidence had chilled her. She was trembling violently. Her ungloved hands, lying in her lap, fluttered nervously, the fingers picked at her riding-skirt with spasmodic inconsequence. By an effort of will, she forced them into quiet, and faced round again.

"I can't understand," she said slowly, feeling that the conduct of which Mrs. Gommet complained was inconsistent with Heckraft's nature, and yet unable altogether to discredit what she heard. "I should not have supposed that Mr. Heckraft would stoop to that sort of thing. . . . It's—dishonourable."

"Oh! when a man's in love—or fancies he is in love—he doesn't stop at much," Mrs. Gommet replied.

Alieta flushed. She failed to detect the malice in

the unnecessary confidence. She was ignorant of having roused Mrs. Gommet's jealousy; had it been explained to her, it is doubtful that she would have understood. But she felt enormously disconcerted and distressed. An emotion, not remotely related to anger, was getting the upper hand, till it temporarily submerged her pain. She allowed a flash of it to reveal itself to Mrs. Gommet.

"Couldn't you manage to prevent men from making love to you?" she asked.

Mrs. Gommet appeared mildly amused.

"You wouldn't talk in that strain if you had ever encountered Tony in one of his masterful moods. . . . Of course I try to stop him. . . . And I'm angry with him. . . . He's repentant enough afterwards. But what can one do? . . . He can't help it, I suppose, poor fellow!"

"Well, I don't see," Alieta said abruptly, with a swift change of front, "what this has to do with me exactly. . . . I can't see how I can help. It's plain to me that this matter rests with yourself. . . . An outsider can't interfere."

"You can help with advice," Mrs. Gommet said plaintively. . . . "I don't know what to do."

"Oh!" Alieta spoke with some impatience. "Surely there isn't any difficulty as to that? . . . And how should I advise you? . . . Men don't make love to me."

Mrs. Gommet smiled.

"Perhaps you are a little obtuse, and don't see it," she returned.

The fighting spirit of her ancestors, the old pioneers, who had won their way in the dark continent, and maintained their right to a share in the conquered land after years of struggle and hardship, arose in Alieta's breast. She looked squarely at the

speaker, lolling gracefully in complacent prettiness in her chair, a smile of malicious vanity parting her lips. After all, what was there apart from her beauty to fear in Alieta? Men might enjoy looking at her, but they would go elsewhere to be amused. . . .

"A woman can always stop a man from becoming a nuisance," Alieta replied coldly. "I may not be so experienced as you, but I know that. I think that much of the blame lies with yourself."

"Of course, if that is the view you take, there is nothing more to be said," Mrs. Gommet returned, assuming a pathetic, almost childish tone. . . . "You've been so kind up to now. . . . I thought you might help. But you're too cold, too intensely practical, to understand."

Alieta might have replied, and with truth, that she was neither, but that she was a woman who had learnt to practise restraint. Instead she remarked, almost humbly:

"I am sorry. But we see this thing so very differently."

"Yes," Mrs. Gommet answered. "You take the man's part, and blame the woman."

The girl stiffened in her seat.

"That isn't just," she returned. "And I don't believe you think that, really."

She did not add that in her heart she blamed this particular man far more, held him more gravely responsible for his disloyal conduct than ever she would the woman, whose shallow nature, she realised, was incapable of a proper appreciation of the moral values concerned in the lowering of big things to the level of trivial philandering. It was all fair sport to the woman, an idle amusement exacted by vanity. But the man's share in it was different.

Alieta's mind swung back to the gloom of a win-

ter's afternoon, to the dimly lit shed, and the strong, tender look in the man's eyes when he set all the rules of the game at defiance and told her simply of his love. Again, she saw him in the evening, his figure outlined against the leaping flames on the hearth, recalled the sorrow in his face, its settled gravity, as he talked to her quietly in fragmentary sentences of the unalterable quality of his love. . . . Was all that meaningless? . . . a stringing together of empty phrases that came from the lips, and no deeper? . . .

She looked up suddenly, and surprised Mrs. Gommet studying her with an impertinent curiosity that made her colourless cheek warm brightly. It flashed across her then for the first time that this woman suspected something of her feeling for Heckraft. She shifted her position, and turning again abruptly, gazed through the open window. Against her volition her eyes wandered to the drying sheds, and memory stirred in their depths once more and accentuated their pain.

"When do you think of getting married?" Mrs. Gommet asked suddenly, apropos of nothing.

"I don't know," Alieta said slowly.

"I thought perhaps Mr. Johnson had fixed matters up when he was here. Of course you saw him?"

"Oh! yes."

Mrs. Gommet regarded the speaker with an exasperated frown. It was so Dutch, she reflected, so disingenuous, this closeness about one's affairs. Alieta never opened out to her.

"I saw him pass in the car," she remarked. "I supposed he would spend most of his time at Odsani."

"He was too busy," Alieta returned, "to have much time to spare."

"Too busy quarrelling," Mrs. Gommet snapped.

Alieta flushed.

"I'm afraid his business wasn't altogether peaceful," she allowed.

"He's split with Joe. . . . We are going out to Nooitgedacht."

Mrs. Gommet rose, and stood, leaning out of the window, a discontented expression in her eyes.

"Nooitgedacht is even more buried than this," she complained. "At least, one has the station here. I don't know how I shall stand it."

She swung around on Alieta with passionate unexpectedness.

"Why couldn't you have left me alone?" she cried. "I was happy enough until you blundered into my life. . . . I didn't want to come back." She beat her hands together in a frenzy of impotent anger, regardless of what the girl, observing her with troubled, apprehensive eyes, thought of this outbreak of temper. "Do you suppose I shall make Joe happy? . . . Do you suppose I can settle down to this drab, dull life? . . . I can't. . . . It's absurd. . . . It's just burying oneself. . . . You ought to have left me alone."

"I didn't know," Alieta returned, stating a simple fact with no attempt at self-justification, "that anyone lived simply to please oneself. If I had thought you were like that I wouldn't have gone to you."

"Well, I am like that," Mrs. Gommet answered. "Why shouldn't one please oneself? . . . I'm like that. . . . I'm going to please myself—always."

She broke off with an abrupt, short laugh.

"What a fool I am! I don't know what makes me talk so. I've allowed you to tie my life into knots, and now I talk of cutting them through, with no means of doing it. . . . I hope my case will be a lesson to you in future to mind your own business."

"Yes," Alieta answered quietly. "It has taught me that, at least."

XXXIII

ANTHONY HECKRAFT fought things out with his conscience and finally made up his mind—or rather confirmed his preconceived opinion—that it was right and fitting that he should go to Alieta, and put his case to her anew by virtue of the knowledge that had come to him unsought. It seemed to him, reviewing matters in the light of recent events, that fate had intentionally placed this knowledge in his hands, to be used in his own service, as well as for Alieta's good. No man who loved a woman worthily would stand aside and let her give herself in ignorance into the care of a man of vicious life.

With this end in view he set out for Odsani.

He had not seen Alieta alone for some time, not in fact since the night on which he had gone out from her presence, and left her standing on the hearth before the leaping fire which Mambersad had kindled because the night was cold. The nights were cold no longer. The hot day darkened after sundown, and the purple of the evening sky deepened, taking on richly sombre hues, against which the long golden light of the stars glowed with a warm intensity where they rose above the horizon and shot up over the hilltops with a perceptible velocity that appeared to decrease appreciatively as they soared and hung in the darkening sky. But the dusk brought no great sense of coolness, only a restful obscurity after the untempered glare of the sun.

Heckraft chose the evening for going to Alieta, why, he could not have explained, unless he was influenced by the feeling that the evening and early morning were the most beautiful hours of the day; and plainly he could not do anything so irregular as pay his call at sunrise.

He dismounted at the low gate which shut off the garden from the veld immediately surrounding it, and the cultivated land beyond. He hitched the rein of his horse to the paling, and opening the gate, walked up the path towards the house. Alieta was in the garden. He caught a glimpse of her white dress through the dark foliage of the orange trees, and quickened his steps till he stood beside her in the path, with the scent of the night flowers about them, the strong sweet scent which is one of the many sensuous charms of the African night. He counted himself lucky in finding her thus alone. Visions of a tedious evening, spent in the old people's society, an evening of disjointed conversation which needed interpretation, until finally, as wearied as himself, the old folk went to bed, had been in his mind. He had prepared himself for it; but this meeting under the open sky, with no one to interfere and divide their attention, was a let off; and he realised as he went towards her how entirely distasteful the other arrangement seemed since he was no longer called upon to face it. One can brace oneself to anything, but let the simple situation offer, and the more difficult becomes impossible.

Alieta looked round in surprise when she heard his approach, and he was at once made uncomfortably conscious of the livid yellows and purples of his injured eye, which he had hoped would pass unremarked in the dusk, by the disconcerting concentra-

tion of her gaze. He lifted his hat, and Alieta gave him her hand.

"Will you—would you mind walking a little way with me?" he inquired diffidently, after their formal greeting. "I've things to say to you. . . . I want to talk with you alone."

She complied at once with the request. They passed beyond the gate, and wandered on to the open veld. It was a moonless night; the star-spangled heavens only dimly illumined the scene. Alieta was strangely silent, and, he felt, extraordinarily cold and detached. He tried to get nearer to her mentally, but every effort he made to drag down the new reserve which he recognised as a barrier between them met with a baffling resistance on her side. In spite of the check, he persevered in his attempt to win her understanding and sympathy. He did eventually impress her with a sense of his earnestness, and she walked beside him, following the worn, and ill-lit track, wondering about him, wondering about the confusing, contradictory conditions of life, and the manifold complexities of the human mind,—wondering, and finding no solution to the riddle.

And then suddenly she was aware of his voice speaking beside her. He had made several inconsequent, irrelevant remarks which had called for no particular attention or response from her; but now he was saying something that mattered, something which concerned her vitally, and saying it with the manner of one who intends to be heard and answered. In a surprisingly direct way too he referred to his love for her.

"It's because I love you," she heard him saying, and became conscious that she had missed the first part of his speech, the part which contained the text to the whole, "that I tell you this. I cannot let you

marry this man, Alieta, in ignorance of his true character."

Alieta looked at him swiftly.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I think I don't quite understand."

"I mean," he said quite bluntly, with his grave eyes on her face, "that Harold Johnson was Mrs. Gommet's lover. . . . I learnt that quite recently. If I had known it sooner, I think—I believe it would have made a difference. Anyway, now I tell you because I must, because, even if you think it vile of me—and knowing that I'm interested, you may judge me hardly—I can't let you blunder into this with your eyes shut, and so make a mess of your life."

For a space there was silence between them. Alieta walked beside him without speaking, her gaze fixed steadily ahead. She had had an ugly surprise in regard to this man before; but this,—this cool denunciation of another in accusing him of the sin he himself had been guilty of, struck her as peculiarly mean. That he should stoop to such a course pained her far more than the news he imparted. She had believed him to be fine and straight and simple, a man with a big nature and a loyal heart, and she had now to admit her mistake. In the greater shock of disappointment in this man whom she loved, she scarcely realised the significance of what he told her. That was a side issue; it affected her less keenly. What was of paramount importance was that it was he who made this discreditable disclosure. Why need he have told her? . . . he, of all the world?

He moved nearer to her in the dragging silence which followed upon his speech.

"My dear," he said, with a grave tenderness in his tones, "I've hurt you. . . . I knew I should. . . . But I'd rather hurt you, Alieta—badly,—I'd rather you

thought me vile, than see you give your clean, pure life into the keeping of a man of licentious habits and loose principles. . . . My dear! . . . I've hurt you. . . . I'd have given my life to have prevented this."

"Yes; you've hurt me," Alieta answered.

She stood still and faced him, outwardly calm, though her heart was beating to suffocation, and the pulses in her throat were going like tiny hammers set in force by the machinery of the heart. . . . Why need he have told her? . . . he, of all men?

"I think you—it's your own word, but I believe it was in my mind before you put it into my mouth—vile."

He gripped her wrists.

"Don't be unjust, Alieta," he said. "So long as I believed him worthy of you I was ready to stand aside. I love you. I've loved you always—from the beginning. . . . I love you enough to give you up. . . . But not to that man—now."

Alieta wrenched her hands away.

"You are vile," she said,—"mean. . . . You come to me with this tale of Harold Johnson with the marks still upon your face which Mr. Gommet placed there for making love to his wife. . . . How dare you come to me? . . . How dare you touch me?"

Heckraft stared at her.

"Absurd!" he cried.

He flushed suddenly.

"Did she tell you that?" he asked.

"Oh! what does it matter," Alieta said, "who told me?"

"It doesn't matter, of course," he answered,—"because it isn't true."

Alieta kept under the wild rush of hope which surged up in her heart at his words; somehow or

other, Mrs. Gommet's tale had carried conviction with it.

"Do you deny that you kissed her?" she asked.

"No. Unfortunately that's true enough. . . . Though I can't think how you got to hear of it. But there's no more in it than that."

Alieta turned away with an air of disgust.

"I don't think there is any more to be said," she remarked. The forced quiet of her manner deserted her. "How could you?" she broke forth. . . . "Oh! how could you? . . . I thought better of you than that."

He followed her, fighting his rising anger with an effort, because of his great love, and his great need of her. He desired passionately to justify himself in her eyes.

"Let me explain," he said,—"if I can. Though I doubt you'll understand. Women—women like yourself, who have never thought much about sex matters—don't understand easily. You are cold and hard and limited. . . . Don't take affront at that,—it's no slight. No man, I imagine, would wish his womenfolk otherwise. It's just the hard purity of women that keeps the world decent. We're different, different in grain. We want things,—want them intensely. And we don't practise sufficient restraint. I've wanted you. . . . I want you now. I wanted you that night when I allowed myself to kiss Mrs. Gommet. I was hungry for you, and I didn't see the remotest chance of ever getting you. She came to me in a moment of weakness. . . . She was just woman to me—woman in the abstract. . . . I kissed her. I've regretted that since, regretted it enormously, because of my respect for her husband,—because, still more, of my respect for women in general, typified in yourself. I didn't know you would hear of it. . . . I didn't guess. . . .

It's immensely disconcerting to me. . . . Anyway, since you have heard, I want you to know the entire truth, instead of only the part which reflects discreditably. Alieta!"—He tried to take her hand again, but she drew instinctively away.—"I want you to try to see this thing as it is, instead of how it appears on the surface,—as something altogether abominable and dishonourable. I have never loved any woman but you."

"Don't!" Alieta said.

She averted her face from him; she did not want him to see the tears that welled in her eyes.

"You don't understand," he muttered, hurt, and keenly disappointed. "I had thought—— But you don't understand."

"No; I don't understand," she replied dully, and moved away and began to retrace her steps.

He stood still, frustrated and angry, looking after her. An impulse to follow her, to make her understand, seized him; but in a crisis of this sort a man is apt to neglect his wisest impulses in yielding to natural chagrin. He turned about abruptly, and walked away from her, taking a circuitous route to where he had left his horse tethered to the garden gate, and unhitching the reins, mounted hastily and rode moodily away into the night.

That was the finish of that, anyway,—the finish of life for him in the Valley of a Thousand Hills. He wished, wished from the bottom of his soul, that his wanderings had not taken him there, that he had never met her. Life, if uneventful and uninteresting before, had at least been less disturbing. Now that he had met her and learned to love her, he knew that no other woman's love could mean the same to him. He was not an ardent man; sex did not dominate him to the extent that any mate would serve.

He had painted his desires to her in exaggerated terms; purposely he had done this. He wished her to know the world as it was, and men as they were; the rest would come easier to her when she grasped these realities. But had he not done himself some injustice, he wondered, as he rode away. She was so coldly pure that the picture he had sketched for her would instinctively repel her. And it was not an accurate picture, so far at least as he was concerned. Until she had crossed his path he had felt no particular call of sex, no unbridled desires. Alieta was the only woman he had ever wanted. But he wanted her intensely, with an almost painful urgency. And that night he had put her further from him than before.

XXXIV

THE following day Alieta wrote to Harold Johnson. It was not an easy letter to write. With the memory of that recent painful scene between them very vividly before her, it was even an embarrassing letter. Had it hurt her more, this breaking with him irrevocably, she would have found the task, if more painful, assuredly less difficult. But she was quite candid with herself. This disgraceful thing which she had learnt concerning him affected her in an altogether more remote degree than Heckraft's share in the matter. That touched her on the raw, and set every nerve quivering. She realised, with concern at herself for having so lightly plighted her troth to this man, that nothing he could do would ever hurt her, cause her such anguish of soul, as the slightest deviation from the path of honour, the least lowering of the standard of good feeling on the part of the man she loved,—would always love, she now knew, no matter how he disappointed her, or fell short of the ideal she had formed of him.

In writing her letter to Johnson, she did not condemn him unheard. She gave him a chance to explain, to deny the accusation, if he could. Oddly enough, she had not once challenged in her own mind the truth of the sordid charge. Little things that had puzzled her found elucidation in this story of his relations with Mrs. Gommet; situations in the past which had been inexplicable, which had seemed at

the time too trivial to demand explanation, recurred to her now with startling vividness. Many things had puzzled her in the old days when he came to Inchanga, —moods, and disconnected phrases, and a sort of furtiveness, which now she understood. She realised instinctively that this thing was true.

She recalled the day when he had, reluctantly and ungraciously, at her urgent request, driven her to the hotel at Maritzburg where Mrs. Gommet was; recalled Mrs. Gommet's amazement,—her blank refusal to go back with him,—her hysterical weeping. . . .

Her face flamed at the recollection, and her eyes hardened. How had he dared to subject her to that indignity? . . .

"If you can honestly deny this thing," she wrote, "and care to do so, after reading this letter, you can come to see me; otherwise I have no wish to see your face again. If this thing is true, nothing you can urge will persuade me into marrying you."

She returned him his ring, and waited. She expected no answer from him, and none came. He accepted his dismissal,—not willingly; he simply had not the courage to face her. But her letter angered and exasperated him almost beyond endurance. It is an odd proof in support of the inconsistency of human nature, that the hard purity of a cold woman appeals more to the sensualist than the readier response of an ardent nature. It whets desire and increases the excitement of conquest. Alieta's reluctant, passionless affection had given Harold Johnson a satisfaction greater than anything he had experienced in his guilty intercourse with Mrs. Gommet, whose response to his caresses had been readier, and had lacked nothing in warmth.

In his chagrin, and wounded vanity, he went—as

men of his type invariably drift to the nearest and surest haven which promises an anodyne for the pain of suffering pride—to Muriel Rath. His welcome, he knew beforehand, was assured. She was quite willing to accept him on any ground. It is doubtful had he told her the truth, and flung himself on her mercy, that he would have found a pardon difficult to win. His confession would not have disgusted her particularly. She cared for him as greatly as she could care for anyone, and she had been brought up to believe that things were permissible to men which nice women never heard of, would, if they heard, ignore. Her outlook on life was narrow, comfortable and old-fashioned, and limited as was her intelligence.

When Johnson proposed to her, rather after the manner of a man flinging a bone to a dog, and half begrudging his generosity, she accepted him gratefully. She shared his confidence in considering herself exceedingly lucky in his condescension.

He dined with the Raths one evening uninvited, and took her out on to the stoep to make his declaration. He had only received Alieta's letter on the previous day, and he carried it still in his pocket.

"Look here!" he said to the girl, as she struck a match for him and lighted his cigarette. "I think we pull rather well together, don't you?"

"I think we get on," she answered, feeling embarrassed and almost frightened by a certain quality in his manner which she had never noticed before.

"That's what I mean," he said. "We hit it somehow. I don't express myself well, but what I want to say is that I like you—enormously. You are so sensible, and all that. . . . You don't seem to expect a man to be a stained-glass saint."

She laughed at that.

"The stained glass generally depicts women," she replied. "I expect that's a general recognition that men aren't quite the same. . . . You have got to go into the world, and *face* things," she added hastily, as though eager not to hurt his feelings by seeming to reflect disparagingly on his sex. "We are sheltered, as it were. You keep the evil off."

The effete feminine argument in defence of masculine laxity, which is one of its immoral encouragements, rather irritated him. He wondered impatiently why she never struck even by accident on an original thought.

"I don't know," he returned vaguely. . . . "Men are different, anyhow."

"Yes," she allowed.

"And you don't think me an altogether bad sort?" he asked.

She looked at him shyly in the subdued light. He could have struck her for the almost fawning diffidence of that look; but her words so heartened him that he speedily forgave the rest.

"I think you splendid," she said. "I have heard my father and yours speak of the way in which you handled those Indians, and though they laughed and called it by the name of bluff, I know they thought you brave. Oh! it's wonderful to be a man,—and fearless." She clasped her hands together and looked at him earnestly. "They are proud of you," she said, and added very softly, so softly that he scarcely heard, and guessed rather at the words:—"So am I."

There was something in a girl, after all, Johnson decided, when she could appreciate a man as Muriel appreciated him. They might call her a fool, if they liked,—it was his own epithet; he had never heard it applied to her by others—it took some discrimination to realise that when a man acted as he had done,

it was the right thing, the only thing, to do in the circumstances. And of course it was brave; there was always a risk, a risk of personal danger, when a man had to deal single handed with a lot of rebellious blacks.

"Look here!" he said abruptly. "Why shouldn't we marry? . . . I'd like to marry you—honest now. . . . What do you say?"

"Oh!" she cried, and turned slightly away from him, and hid her face.

"You like me?" he said quickly, not really doubting it, but a little taken aback at sight of her averted face.

"Yes," she murmured. She uncovered her face, and looked up at him, and then looked again swiftly away. "I like you. . . . If you wish it, I don't mind."

It was not altogether quite what the lovers of romance would consider appropriate to the occasion, but it appeared to satisfy Johnson, and the girl whom he proposed to make his wife. They spent a mild, unexciting half-hour in one another's society. He placed Alieta's ring on her finger, with an agreeable feeling that he was getting even with Alieta somehow by his act, quite indifferent to the fact that the ring was rather big for its present wearer, or that Muriel might think him over confident in coming thus prepared. The thought did not occur to her. She was becomingly grateful, and she admired the ring immensely.

Later they went in to receive the joyful congratulations of the parents of the girl. Inexplicably, neither Sir George Rath nor his wife demanded anything better for their eldest child.

When Mrs. Johnson heard of the engagement, which was several days later, a spirit of vindictive-

ness prompting Harold Johnson to keep from her as long as possible the extreme gratification which he knew she would experience at his news, she was relieved beyond measure. Once again she could indulge her dreams of a fashionable wedding. Harold had got over his infatuation for that wretched, obscure Dutch girl, whom he would have had to marry in a Dutch church, and almost secretly. It seemed to her that Providence had intervened to stop so unseemly an arrangement. It had been a mad impulse, the terrible step which her son had contemplated,—a generous, mad impulse, she felt assured. He was sane now; the foolishness he had meditated was finally set aside. She was so genuinely relieved that she ordered half a dozen new frocks on the strength of his news. It reveals an odd twist in human nature that when most pleased we indulge our particular weakness. A drunkard similarly affected would have made a night of it.

In becoming engaged to Muriel within two days of his dismissal from Alieta, Johnson felt that he had justified his manhood, and so was satisfied with the result, even while feeling bitterly resentful towards Alieta. Not having it in his power to punish her, he visited his resentment on his fiancée. He made a very unsatisfactory lover, irritable and indifferent. Muriel bore with his uncertain moods with surprising patience and good humour. If she was disappointed she contrived to conceal the fact. After all, she had got what she desired; one must pay in proportion to what one has.

It was not so easy for Alieta as it was for Harold Johnson, this breaking of her engagement. She found it difficult to explain, with the reservations which loyalty to the Gommets demanded of her. Mrs. Van der Vyver, who suspected Heckraft of being the

driving force in the disruption, was difficult to convince, in her disappointment at this break with a man of such brilliant prospects as young Johnson. It seemed, from her talk, that the man himself was of less importance than his position; and this mercenary view angered Alieta; the fact that she and Harold were temperamentally unsuited did not appear to weigh with her mother at all.

"Oh, that!" she exclaimed, when Alieta announced that she had neither respect nor love for the man she had engaged herself to marry, and had since dismissed. "What does love matter after the first month? . . . And as for respect!—Does any woman in her senses respect a man? They are all brutes . . . We can't understand them. But the dear Lord has made them necessary to the continuance of the race. And they're useful to do the hard work of the world while we are occupied with the finer, if heavier, work of bearing children. A man is only a mate. You don't choose him out of respect, but because he can give you children, and provide for them and you."

"I want my mate for higher things than that," Alieta replied steadily. "I want him to give me children, and to be a worthy father to them."

"Well, you won't find him," Mrs. Van der Vyver snapped, "until you get to heaven."

Mr. Van der Vyver treated the matter in a different spirit. He fought shy of the subject when alone with his daughter, but he gave her the idea that he was somehow sorry for her. She appealed to him directly on the subject one day, and because they were alone together and there was no evading it, he gave her his reluctant attention.

"Don't you think I did right," she asked him, "to give up a man who, however advantageous his prospects, was not a good man?"

"Goodness is comparative," he replied guardedly. "We are none of us perfect."

"Would you wish me to marry Harold Johnson," she persisted, "if you knew, as I know, that he had led an evil life?"

He sat up suddenly at the question. Alieta had succeeded at last in gaining his undivided attention. He was very fond of his daughter, and very proud of her, and her happiness weighed more with him at that moment than young Johnson's wealth.

"No," he answered abruptly,—"no."

He pulled at his beard for a while, and looked fierce and undecided.

"A bad man is a blot on the world's creation," he said reflectively. "It is not so very difficult to run straight—no! I want no evil sons-in-law," he added with vehemence.

He scrutinised her appraisingly.

"But I hate waste—waste of fine material. . . . And I have enough—yes, I have enough to provide for a few small mouths."

Alieta, though she made no response, understood him perfectly. He wished to convey that if she elected to marry a man of no substance, he would undertake to see that all was well with her and with her children. She gathered that from his speech, and she was grateful to him that he did not put his meaning into plainer words.

XXXV

IT happened very opportunely for Heckraft that Sir George Rath should at this juncture offer him the management of the Ringhals estate. He had heard of the possibility of this offer being made to him from Mr. Johnson, who had written to him on the subject before the Indian rising, and who now wrote again, a generous, friendly letter, in which he offered his manager facilities for taking over his new job at an early date.

Heckraft went down to Durban for an interview with Sir George. While at the coast he heard with some amazement of young Johnson's engagement. Considering all things, it struck him that the man had moved with most indecent haste. But beyond the fact that this news told him that Alieta had acted upon the information she had received from him and broken her engagement, it did not particularly interest him, save that in an impersonal way he was sorry for the other girl. His own case, he recognised, was not affected in the least. He had prejudiced himself in Alieta's eyes, and won her contempt.

He recognised in this attitude of Alieta's towards him a strong sense of injustice. He felt that she placed him on a level with Johnson, and the thought tormented him. He wanted to go to her and attempt some justification of himself, to make her understand, and take a reasonable view of what was after all not such a disreputable situation as she appeared to consider it. He believed that she put him down for a

libertine of a peculiarly crooked and jealous disposition. And he wanted to make her see that he was nothing of the sort,—it was of immense importance to him that she should be induced to realise that she did him a grave injustice in harbouring so base an idea.

Only a sense of the absurdity of such a course kept him from going to her and making his appeal. But the thing fretted him almost beyond endurance; it kept him awake at nights, tossing restlessly on a bed that seemed to have no repose in it, chafing and impotent, at times bitterly resentful and angry, and again filled with a strange remorse for having fallen short of her standard, and a great tenderness towards Alieta, which mood was invariably succeeded by one of despondency.

Despondency was the most enduring of his many mental phases. He had never in his life before experienced such an intensity of misery as he now knew. It seemed to him that some quality which makes for gladness and beauty and all that is best in life, had passed out of his world, and left it blank and cheerless, like a windy, sunless scene on a grey day.

His relations with the Gommets, too, had undergone a change. Gommet had always in mind the confidence which an unguarded moment had wrung from him without his volition. He hated to think that Heckraft knew about his wife; the fact made him almost eager for the coming separation. There were times when he could not entirely hide the satisfaction he felt. Heckraft understood in some degree, but it hurt him none the less that this man whom he had liked so well, who had been such a good chum, should evince so unmistakably his eagerness to be quit of him. It seemed to him that there was no

loyalty in friendship when a woman intervened. The bleakness was here too; it enveloped everything; it chilled affection, and invited distrust.

Mrs. Gommet's feelings were more complex. Her inclinations warred incessantly in curious contradictoriness. Resentment against Heckraft caused her to share her husband's anxiety for his speedy departure, and again thoughts of the dullness of life when the manager had left and they two should be at Nooitgedacht together, alone, appalled her, and made her wish that things might go on as they were. Great chunks, as she put it, of her husband's society and nothing to lighten it, was deadly in contemplation. And she did not see a way out,—not so much as a chink of a crack by which she could emerge into a freer world. She saw nothing for it but to go on as she was until the end of time. The outlook to her also appeared bleak beyond compare.

"I believe you are glad to be leaving us," she remarked one evening to Heckraft. It was the last evening on which they would be alone together. The new manager and a young mechanic were coming on the morrow to take over from Gommet. She looked at him resentfully as she spoke across the narrow table.

He made an indirect answer.

"I suppose change appeals to most people," he said, and forgot that at one time he had thought to finish out his span among the hills, and had been content with the prospect.

"Particularly when it includes a rise in screw," Gommet struck in.

Mrs. Gommet smiled vindictively.

"He'll be growing rich, and getting married, I expect," she said. "That's the next we shall hear."

He looked at her hard and made no answer. Mrs.

Gommet felt herself changing colour under the look. It seemed to her that his eyes accused her of what he would not put into words. Her remark had been provocative, almost a challenge.

Gommet frowned at his wife's speech. It brought to his mind things he would rather forget, and stirred up bitter memories that rankled still and would never be entirely buried. Abruptly he pushed back his chair and rose from the tea-table.

"It's odd," he remarked to Heckraft, as he crossed to the window and started to fill his pipe, "to think of the changes, and the things that have happened since you first came. You seem to have been a disturbing force, and to have upset the serenity of this confounded hole."

"And yet nothing that has happened has been of my bringing about," Heckraft said.

"Directly, no. But I've been here ten years, and during the whole of that time there has been practically no change in the order of things; you come, and within two years the whole place seems laid open to change, to a new system altogether, a veritable sweeping clean of established customs. To-morrow the new men come in and our place knows us no more. They've swept out the Indians, and now it is the white man's turn."

"You wouldn't have remained, anyway," Mrs. Gommet said, and started to clear the table. "You always meant to own Nooitgedacht. You know you are as pleased as possible really; but you must have your grumble. I'm glad the new men are coming. They'll bring some fresh ideas, and liven us up a bit."

"They'll bring us news of a sort, I suppose," Gommet allowed grudgingly. "I'm keen to hear how things are actually going. From the papers the strike

seems to be sizzling out. It was never more than half-hearted; the poor devils were intimidated by their leaders; and, in the main, their leaders were right. But they'll be forced to climb down; they can't stand out against the government. They'll come to some compromise that won't satisfy anyone, and in a few years' time the whole trouble will crop up again. . . . Like the trouble in July on the Rand. Things are looking ugly there. Seems as though the Colony was in for a big railway strike."

"Let us hope wiser counsels will prevail," Heckraft observed.

Gommet laughed.

"That's the stick-in-the-mud way in which you conservative minded people always take these questions until the trouble is in your midst. . . . Look ahead, man; that's the only way to prevent trouble."

"Some people look ahead so far that they invite trouble," Heckraft retorted.

"Oh! What's the use of arguing with Joe?" Mrs. Gommet said. "Are you going to carry the tray for me, Tony?"

Heckraft lifted the tray and carried it out, as he had been in the habit of doing since they had been without servants. Mrs. Gommet had always made this an opportunity for coquetry, but she was coquettish no longer; the manager's manner was not encouraging of these practices. He made scant effort now to conceal his dislike of her intimate moods.

"You are angry with me about something, Tony," she said.

She looked up at him deliberately, with innocent inquiry in her eyes. She had come to a sudden resolution. She wanted to know if she was correct in surmising that what she had told Alieta had produced the result she had hoped for. She meant to brazen

it out. It would not have disconcerted her at the moment if he had accused her openly of treachery. The coming of those other men on the morrow would relieve the unpleasantness consequent on their strained relations, and on the following day Heckraft himself would be gone. She felt that she would like him to know what he owed to her before he left and passed out of her life forever. Some quality of meanness in her composition made her desire that intensely. She longed to see him wince. But Heckraft had no intention of giving her the satisfaction she sought. He set down the tray of things he had carried out for her on the spotless kitchen table, and faced her squarely where she stood beside the table, looking up at him with puzzled, disingenuous eyes.

"You don't really think that," he said, regarding her quizzically. "Was ever any man actually angry with you?"

"Oh! plenty times," she simpered, under the impression that he was intending a compliment.

"More fool the man, then," he returned coolly. "I'd as readily lose my temper with a mischievous child."

"But I'm not a child," she pouted.

"Aren't you? . . . I have my doubts. You have not grown up yet, anyway."

"I'm older than you think," she said, a little uncertain now as to the implied compliment.

He smiled suddenly.

"Oh, years! What do years signify? I was referring to the mind."

Mrs. Gommet flushed.

"I think you are very rude," she said.

"I am," he acknowledged. "It is one of my dominant characteristics that I have always been brutally frank."

She considered this.

"You *are* angry with me," she declared. . . . "That's your way of getting even with me."

"Getting even with you!" he repeated, and eyed her curiously. "What for?"

She turned away petulantly, with a slight lift of the chin. She had never, he thought, looked so wizenedly childish and altogether ridiculous as at that moment. As he had described her, so she appeared to him, a woman with the mind of a mischievous child. Nature had proceeded with her in one direction, and stood still in another; the more important, the finer part of her, was suffering from arrested development.

A moment of triumph seized her when he had left the kitchen.

"He does know," she said, and looked vixenish and entirely pleased.

But this brief triumph was followed by a very unusual remorse.

"It was mean," she mused. . . . "Yes, it was mean. . . . I wish I hadn't done it."

And then, after a pause, and with a splash of plates into the washing-up bowl,—

"I don't care." . . .

That last was significant of the speaker's attitude towards life generally, the attitude of a mind which has lost, or probably never possessed, the power to balance results in relation to, and consequent upon, acts. When an impulse prompted her, she yielded to it; her matter-of-fact acceptance of what followed was almost masculine. It could not be helped; there was nothing more to be said.

Heckraft went back to the sitting-room. Gommet was seated in his usual corner, smoking, with a paper

open on his knees. He looked round as the other man entered.

"You never told me," he said, "that the cub was engaged to Rath's daughter. It's here—in the Mercury."

"I didn't suppose it would interest you," Heckraft returned.

Gommet slapped the paper on his knee with a hairy, vehement hand.

"God! What fools some women are!" he muttered. "I suppose if she knew he was a blackguard, it wouldn't make a ha'porth of difference to her. Some women don't seem to mind. . . . Alieta's not that sort. She wouldn't have him, I take it. . . . I never thought that affair would come off."

He took a knife from his pocket and ripped out the paragraph and burnt it. Heckraft, watching him, formed the idea that he did so in order to prevent the news catching his wife's eye.

"I had fancied you were going in there, Tony," Gommet resumed after a pause. He fidgeted with his pipe and sucked at it noisily. "Alieta is a woman in a thousand. You'll be a bigger fool than I take you for, if you don't seize your opportunity. Suppose you go out of this,—who's to say you'll find her waiting when it occurs to you to come back?"

"You are altogether out, Joe," Heckraft answered quietly. "I've had my try, but it wasn't a bit of use."

Gommet was properly amazed.

"Well, I'm blowed!" was all he could ejaculate.

He seemed to have further trouble with his pipe and drew at it hard. Finally he put the pipe down.

"I'm sorry, old man," he jerked out awkwardly. "I wouldn't have mentioned it if I'd had any idea."

"That's all right," Heckraft said.

He stepped out through the window, and stood for

a moment on the stoep, bathed in the after-glow of the setting sun.

"I've proposed to her twice," he said, looking away towards the road, the sunlit glow in his eyes, "and she refused me. Since then I have written to her, but—I have had no reply."

He wheeled about, and stepping off the stoep, started to walk up the road, going at a tremendous rate, as a man travels who has some definite object in view,—the object, possibly, of outpacing his own thoughts.

He wanted her, wanted her urgently. It seemed to him that he would never be able to subdue the hungry craving for her which every mention of her name, every moment's thought of her, created in him afresh. Life without her was one long starvation, a ceaseless demand for her presence with no possibility of its gratification.

There were moments, moments of exasperated futility, when he felt he must carry her, carry her by sheer force,—by strength of will,—physical strength, —win her somehow violently. But the mood of stark madness was invariably followed by a mood of corresponding sanity. A man does not woo roughly in these days, that is not with success. And if she would not come to him willingly, with all her heart for him, and all her trust, it were better for him in the long run that he should go hungry for her for the rest of his days.

XXXVI

HECKRAFT did not walk far; his steps lagged as he got out of view of the house, and a certain weariness, an air of dejection, took the place of the more purposeful look with which he had started forth.

After all, what was there to walk for? There was no aim in walking, not even exercise; he had had all the physical exercise he needed that day. Nor could he by changing his ground get rid of his thoughts. They accompanied him along the steep ascent, where so many memories met him mockingly as he climbed the dusty road in the failing light, climbed slowly now, with dragging footsteps, and tired, accustomed eyes which viewed the surrounding scene with a sense of familiarity, and yet also with a feeling of strangeness, as though the hills wore a different aspect from that which he had known, an aspect more remote, less intimate and friendly. They seemed to have withdrawn from him, to be altogether less accessible, less a part of the life of the place. It was perhaps, he reflected, because he had always in his mind associated Alieta with the hills,—they had made a background for her.

He reached a curve in the road, and gazed upward. The land rose sharply above him, and all the hillside was dark with wattles which spread over it, a carpet of unrelieved green. The summit of the hill was crowned with them; the tops of the thin belt of trees showed dense like tightly packed fir trees, while the slim trunks revealed between each a thin line of

light from the sky. Odd, but he had never noticed before how the sky showed between the naked trunks.

He climbed a little higher. Round the next bend he had met with his unpleasant encounter with Hantz. He recalled that meeting with the madman, the helpless feeling of terror that had seized him, his strong hold on life which had made death seem so awful. Death had been very near that day. In the bitter mood of the moment, he was of the opinion that it was almost a pity that Hantz had not finished his job, and settled his difficulties forever. But at the time how he had struggled for life! . . .

He reached a further point in the road, and halting, walked to the edge and looked out across the valley. He saw, as something fresh, the hills stretching away endlessly in a continuous chain, a continuous variety, —rounded hills covered with verdure, hills with sharper summits, and again others, square-topped and flat, melting into the atmosphere, a suggestion of grey outline showing wanly against the sky. Far below gleamed the metals of the railway, winding in extraordinarily sharp, snake-like curves between its narrow banks.

In the waning light the hills detached themselves, stood out with new and surprising beauty, arresting and strangely moving. Their summits and slopes revealed bright, unexpected colours; a soft light green flowed over them, stained with patches of wattle like dark blots on the lighter background, and smaller patches of cultivation, where the dark man grew his mealies, and again small clearings on which he erected his reed-thatched, mud and wattle hut.

As he looked, Heckraft experienced a sudden revulsion of feeling. The sense of failure, of bit-

terness, fell away from him. Once more he had himself in hand. The hills breathed courage and a dignified serenity that insensibly affected him, that gripped him somehow; pointing out, as they seemed to point out, with a startling clearness the dignity of life, and the want of appreciation of the individual who allows himself to be mastered by his circumstances. While not attempting to dull the emotions, no man should be subject to them. To ignore the power which is in one to soar above adverse circumstances is to ignore what is highest and best in human nature, the divine right of the individual to be arbitrator in his own life.

Heckraft moved abruptly, and turned, and continued his way up the hill.

"If only I had her here with me now," he mused, "she would understand. . . . She would know. . . ."

He thought for a while and walked on.

"One day," he reflected, "I shall go to her again,—one day soon."

Then he turned about abruptly, moved by a fresh thought, and retraced his steps.

He went to the hotel and wrote a note to Alieta, which he entrusted to the charge of a Kaffir. He sent the Kaffir off on horseback to Odsani. In the note he reminded her that the morrow was his last day in Drummond. He asked her to meet him at sunset at a certain point in the road,—the point where he had stood that evening and looked across the winding valley between its sentinel hills.

He went back to the house, flushed and satisfied, with a bearing altogether more cheery and hopeful than he had worn of late. When he entered, Gommet was drinking whisky, and Mrs. Gommet sat near the lamp with the table littered with material, making herself a dress. She looked surprised at his quick

return,—surprised and manifestly curious at his changed appearance.

"You look as though you had enjoyed your walk," she said.

"I have," he returned.

"You are as unsociable as Joe. . . . You might have asked me to go."

"Come now," he suggested.

"No; I'm busy. . . . Play to me instead. . . . I'm dull."

That was her usual plaint, he reflected as he fetched his violin. She was one of those people who always desire to be amused.

But the music was more to Mrs. Gommet than mere amusement. It spoke to her, as the hills spoke to Heckraft; it brought out what was best in her. That night, when she wished him good night before following her husband to their room, she lingered a while, irresolute, an unaccountable impulse moving her to confession. The confession hung back for a time while she pondered the folly of speech. Finally her better self conquered, and she lifted a pair of sincere, quite serious eyes to his.

"I told her that you kissed me," she said in a half-shamed, half-sullen voice.

"I was afraid so," he returned, not attempting to misunderstand.

She hesitated a further moment. He remained quite still, watching her curiously.

"I made more of it than there was any need for," she went on after a silence. . . . "I made quite a lot of it. . . . I'm sorry, Tony," she added, flushing beneath his look.

"So am I," he said harshly. "It—places me in a difficult position. It's—— Oh! well, it is done, anyhow, isn't it?"

She moved away, dissatisfied, a little disappointed by his manner of receiving her confession. But at the door some further impulse prompted her to pause and give him the benefit of her knowledge of her own sex.

"If she cares for you—in the right way," she remarked a trifle ungraciously, "what I said to her won't make any real difference—in the long run."

The following evening before sunset Heckraft set out on his walk. He reached the place where he had asked Alieta to meet him, and paced slowly up and down, waiting for her, with his hands clasped behind him, and his eyes on the setting sun.

He was hopeful,—there was nothing capricious about Alieta,—but he was at the same time not confident that she would come. If she failed him, he knew that it would mean that she did not wish him to hope. Nevertheless, he decided that, if she did not come, he would walk out to Odsani that same evening for a final word with her. He would—he must see her once again.

The sun sank below the hills, and the glory of the after-glow suffused the sky with splashes of gold and crimson, and soft pinks and saffrons like the lights in the facets of a jewel. The hills were bathed in a wonderful radiance, which warmed and gilded their summits with a dazzling brilliancy, and added a hundred beauties that the sun alone can lend.

Heckraft watched the changing scene while he waited with eager impatience for the coming of Alieta,—watched the fires die in the west, and the brilliance fade, and long shadows steal forth imperceptibly from the shade in advance of night and lie along the hillsides. Denser shadows filled the valley. The air changed in quality, grew cooler, as the mist

began to gather, a white, soft mist like a billowy cloud leaning from the blue ether to shroud the hills.

The thought came to him, as he watched the scene, that all this was symbolic of life. This beautiful valley, winding among its mighty hills, was the Valley of Life, set about and guarded by the heights of the Mind's Ideals. Occasionally the mists gather, the heights are obscured, and the Valley overshadowed by a cloud which is named Mistrust. But always behind the cloud shines the illuminating, glorifying light of the sun, which is the World's Truth.

The idea pleased him; he dwelt on it for a while. Always he had felt the greatness of the hills as well as the wonder of them, their direct influence upon mankind. The connection between man and the earth dates back to the beginning of things.

And then abruptly he became aware of Alieta's approach. She was riding the big bay horse on which he had so often seen her mounted across the boundary fence of Odsani, riding it slowly, at a walking pace. This fact—the slowness of her approach—conveyed an impression to him that she came reluctantly. He had meant as soon as he saw her to hasten to meet her; but a new shyness seized him, an extraordinary sense of uncertainty as to what he ought to do. He stood in the road, undecided, feeling awkward and inadequate; she had ridden to within a few paces of him before he moved. Then in a moment he became cool and clear-headed again. He went forward and stood close to her horse, looking up at her, and the light of love lit his eyes.

"Dear. . . . It was kind of you to come," he said.

She remained quite still, looking down at him gravely.

"I didn't know—you were going away," she said.

"Would it have made a difference—to your coming

now, I mean," he asked,—"if I had not been going away?"

Alieta hesitated. A flush came to her face, and her glance fell.

"No," she answered after a while.

Heckraft could have shouted with the relief which her answer gave him.

"I want you to get down," he said, "and stand beside me. . . . I want to tell you things."

She relinquished the reins to him, and he put up his arms and lifted her from the saddle, and set her on her feet. He tethered the horse to a tree by the roadside; then he joined her where she stood, holding up her riding-skirt, and watching his movements attentively, with deep, gravely wondering eyes.

"You must have thought it odd, my asking you to come to me," he began.

"No," she said simply.

He looked pleased.

"I was half afraid you might not see it quite in the way it was intended," he said. "I wanted you here—just at this spot, where everything is so immense, so fine,—where the hills speak to one, and the free evening air blows the fever and stress of the daytime away. . . . I came here yesterday, with my nerves jarring and at dissonance with everything about me, and this," he indicated the view with a movement of his hand, "put that right for me, somehow. . . . I wanted you then—badly. . . . I fancied if you stood beside me here, among the big, simple things of nature, I might make you understand better what I tried to make you understand the last time we met, and failed to, because I bungled matters, put matters badly, and merely disgusted you."

"Only for the time," she answered.

She looked at the view for a space, and then turned

her face deliberately, and met his gaze with steadfast, shining eyes.

"It was just because I loved you so that I felt so badly hurt," she said softly. "It is because I love you that I understand why you asked me to come to you—here,—why I was glad you asked me. It proved your confidence in me."

He took her hand.

"Oh, Alieta!" he said. . . . "Oh! my dear! . . ."

His voice shook with the stress of his emotion. He gripped her hand tighter and drew her to him, and for a while they clung together without speaking, lip to lip, heart to heart, two human beings in a perfect harmony of love and understanding, apart from the world of men and women, sheltered from it by the immensities of the new world in which they stood.

She broke away from him presently, and stood back a little, looking at him, blushing and smiling, with odd gleams and lights in her eyes that made them extraordinarily beautiful.

"I have a confession to make also," she said, and her voice was softer and sweeter than it had ever sounded before in his ears, her smile more tender, more quietly content. "I have loved you always. . . . When my lips said No to you, my heart cried aloud Yes. I thought you knew that my lips lied. . . . But, ah! my dear, you never knew what that lie cost me. . . . If I have been hard and difficult, dearest heart, it was just my unsatisfied longing that made me so."

"Alieta!" he said. . . . "Alieta! . . ."

He reached for and found her hand and held it tightly clasped in his. Words failed him. He wanted to tell her a hundred things and could tell her none. Alieta pressed closer to his side. She emitted a soft, low, happy laugh that was, despite its happiness, verging close on tears.

"But you were letting me go out of your life," he said, suddenly recalling that but for his letter she would not be beside him now. . . . "Think, if I hadn't written,—if you hadn't come to-night. . . ."

"I would never have let you go out of my life, dear," she interposed softly. "I was wondering, when your letter came, how I could go to you and tell you that. . . . Dear, I wanted to come." Her voice broke in a sob. "I was so glad, so glad, that you asked me to come."

She looked at him, with her face flushed, and the tears welling in her eyes. His own eyes were alight with a passion of love. He caught her in his embrace and kissed her with a great tenderness upon the lips.

"Mine!" he said, and kissed her lips again. . . . "My mate. . . ."

The mist grew denser; it enveloped them, and shut out the view as it rolled slowly, like some inexorable fate, down through the valley. Side by side they stood, with clasped hands, shoulder to shoulder, watching it,—looking away into immense distances, talking little, thinking of many things, and feeling intensely the joy and the wonder of life. . . .

Ah! beautiful valley—Valley of a Thousand Hills —Valley of Life, threading its inevitable way among the lofty heights of big thoughts, and great and simple truths.

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